The Magic Deer and Other Stories

J P Das



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The author emphasizes socially relevant themes like poverty, untouchability, the problem of dowry, the position of women and the responsibility of the legislator. But more than these, the stories tell of the complexities of human exchange—the strain and stresses that are inevitable in any relationship, and the lack of communication between people.

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Translated from the original Oriya by the author



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Contents

The Magic Deer

On the tenth day of the rehearsals, Manasi made it absolutely clear that she would not do the role of Sita unless a live deer was brought. There were two divergent views on this unexpected demand of Manasi. One view, favoured by the director of the play, was that a model of a deer should be good enough, since in theatre the understanding of the viewer is what matters, and bringing a live animal on the stage would be an affront to the art of the theatre. The other view was that in modern theatre, the trend was to bring it nearer the people by showing reality as it is, e.g. the flooding of a coal mine or a village on fire, and so it would not be out of place to show a deer running across the stage. The playwright, who was keenly involved with the rehearsals in the beginning but was now keeping himself aloof after seeing his play being pulled about, believed in the first view in his heart of hearts, but in the controversy that raged, he professed to be a supporter of the second.

It was after a good deal of animated discussion that it had finally been decided to stage the Magic Deer, a play based on an episode from the epic Ramayana. The play was an example, or at least claimed to be one, of successful adaptation of a mythological story into a symbolic modern play. The playwright maintained that he had attempted to show Sita as a woman in flesh and blood and in this modern interpretation of the epic, the golden magic deer was a symbol of sex. The director did not think much of the playwright's claim, and made additions and alterations and freely meddled with the script to make the play

more contemporary and symbolic. This had become a bone of contention between the director and the playwright and both were trying to enlist the actors and organisers into their own groups.

When the controversy relating to the deer, which they all claimed was a mere symbol, reached its climax, some members tried to bring about a rapprochement. One of them suggested fixing a screen behind the stage and projecting a sequence of a running deer from a film. Manasi was busy explaining some finer point of the controversy to the director when the suggestion was placed before him, and the director called cinema the number one enemy of theatre and ruled that he would rather use a real deer than a film deer. The director's volte-face put the playwright in a quandary and when he suggested a stuffed deer instead, no one took his side. Manasi's ultimatum brought in an untimely interval in the rehearsals.

Though Magic Deer was Manasi's maiden attempt at histrionics, she had a big say in everything connected with the play. The director, who treated the members of the cast with scant respect, was extra courteous to Manasi. He had set high standards of acting for the others, but went out of his way to praise the mediocre acting of Manasi. The director was good at his work and so could get away with his capriciousness. But everyone knew that the director had an ambition of making a film, that Manasi's husband was a well-known industrialist and that the director somehow thought of achieving his object through Manasi.

After her son went away to the boarding school, Manasi was left with lots of time and boredom on her hands and so she had embarked on several plans. In the first phase she had decided on various games, having regard to the need for reducing her weight. She took lessons from top tennis and badminton coaches for five and four weeks respectively, but then got bored and joined the health club of a five-star hotel. Her over-weight body however refused to cooperate with her efforts and when the needle of the weighing machine refused to budge from its original position, Manasi diverted her mind to the fine arts. She learnt oil painting from a famous painter for three months and then took sitar lessons from an internationally known maestro for two whole months. But a conscientious south Indian Guru refused after the second day to teach her Bharatanatyam. Manasi

was by now connected with all the cultural organisations of the city including theatre groups, and she now decided to master the art of acting too.

In all these plans of hers, she had the whole-hearted support of her husband Anang, who had now to bear a much lesser demand on his time from Manasi. Manasi had stopped bothering him in his office with requests to buy her things or to take her out. Anang encouraged her to join various cultural organisations and did not hesitate to donate fat sums of money to them. He was very happy when Manasi decided to take up acting, for the rehearsals were in the evenings and Anang was now free to call his friends over to his house for stag parties.

Manasi had great faith in her histrionic talents and had no doubts that this was the field in which she would make her mark. She wanted Anang to be acquainted with her hitherto undiscovered talent and had that evening asked him to come to the rehearsals. In some weak moment, Anang had agreed to her request, instead of excusing himself on the pretext of an imaginery board meeting. He was now on his third peg of whisky in a friend's house and cursed himself when he looked at his watch. Had there been a telephone in the place of rehearsal, he could have rung up from the board meeting to tell Manasi that he would be late. But this was not possible and so Anang gulped down his drink and started off.

Rehearsals were being held in a dingy little place and when Anang reached there, he was met outside by a short dark fellow whom he took to be the watchman. The man was in fact the director, who took him inside. The members of the cast had finished their rehearsals for the day and did not seem to be too happy to do another round of rehearsals for the benefit of Anang. But they went through the paces, for the director had a bad temper and even the playwright chose to keep quiet.

As he watched the rehearsals, the whole proceedings took a dreamlike form in his inebriated mind. The girl playing the role of Manasi's maid and the elderly lady playing an ogress both appeared to him extraordinarily beautiful. The movement of the actors and actresses and their theatrical dialogue charmed him and he applauded the performance several times by clapping his hands. Everyone was now happy with Anang and when the director posed the problem of the deer before him, there was no

objection. The director had of course not forgotten to tell him that getting a real deer was originally Manasi's idea. Anang, who was adept at getting the most difficult decisions through board meetings, closed his eyes and pretended to ponder over the problem. He opened his eyes and muttered 'real is beautiful' and then raised his voice and said, "You must have a real deer."

The playwright, who was one of the founder members of the theatre group, found the situation to be slipping out of his hands, but not knowing how to protest, merely said to himself, but where does one find a real deer? The director was keeping a watchful eye on the playwright and did not want his soliloquy to go unchallenged. "We'll get one," he said aloud, and looked at Anang. Anang who had his undivided attention on the ogress was bothered when the director looked at him for answer and said, "Yes, it's quite easy to get a deer; I will get you one." The director now looked at the playwright with an open snigger and the playwright, who was all the time hanging around the rehearsals, suddenly remembered some urgent work and hurried away.

Rehearsals now went on full steam and Manasi made rapid progress in her histrionics. The playwright had stopped coming to the rehearsals and the director was now free to mutilate the script unhindered. The director had also meanwhile been able to gain Manasi's confidence and had shared with her his plans for a film trilogy. With the progress of rehearsals, Manasi got to know the story of the films and was quite impressed. The director was full of praise for Manasi's acting ability and Manasi too reciprocated by showing him respect due to a potential Satyajit Ray. She also made up her mind to adopt film as her next medium, after theatre.

After returning from the rehearsals that evening, Anang got busy in real board meetings and forgot all about the play. Suddenly one evening, while on his third whisky in a friend's place, he remembered the ogress and decided to go to the rehearsals to pick up Manasi. That reminded him of the deer and he rang up Tony. Tony must have had some original name, but everyone knew him by this name now. He was known for getting the impossible done. He could produce xerox copies of secret official notings in a jiffy and given a suitable commission, could arrange quota, permit and licence for prohibited and

banned items. He had friends and contacts in government and political circles and he claimed that nothing was impossible. He was a man of few words and when Anang asked him whether he could arrange a deer, Tony only asked him how many he wanted. Anang was not sure and asked for two. "Male or female", asked Tony, and Anang told him that either would do. "When do you want them?" asked Tony. Anang said, "Soonest possible" and Tony said, "Done."

When Anang reached the rehearsals, there was no one waiting for him outside. The rehearsals were going on and so no one bothered about him as he sat down on a broken chair in a corner and looked around. The woman who three pegs later had looked very beautiful the other evening, looked to him like an ogress after his four pegs today. The rehearsals too seemed very dull and boring. When the ogress came and sat near him after finishing her part, Anang started having doubts about the genuineness of the scotch whisky he had taken in his friend's house the earlier evening. He made up his mind not to come to the rehearsals again and made a list of many imaginery urgent items of work. When the rehearsals were over after quite some time, the director came to him and without so much as a greeting said, "What about the deer?" Anang, who had exhausted all his patience tried to match his voice with equal discourtesy and said, "You will get it in time."

Two evenings later, Manasi brought the director home. It had been a busy day for Anang and he had decided to have a quiet evening. But the director shuffled in like a black bull and made himself comfortable on Anang's favourite sofa. Anang simply said "Hello" to him and concentrated on his cigarette, as if the smoke contained many mysteries which he must unravel that very instant. But the director was too thick-skinned to notice the coolness, and he went over to the bar and surveyed the drinks. He ignored Manasi's dig that there was no rum and poured scotch in two glasses and offered one to Anang. Anang did not like the brazen informality of the man and refused the drink and went over to the bar to mix a drink for himself. The director however refused to take offence, gulped down a drink and passed on the empty glass to Manasi and settled down with the second glass.

Anang wondered how Manasi got to know of the director's

preference for rum. As a matter of fact, he did not approve of Manasi's manners now and was wondering how to snub the dark fat fellow. But the director was much too clever for him and before he could say anything said, "We need the deer from tomorrow during the rehearsals." Anang did not answer him but went to the telephone and called Tony. Tony, who was a man of few words only said, "I'll come to your office tomorrow at ten." Anang now looked straight at the director and said "You will get it tomorrow," in a manner which implied 'you may go now'.

The director however, was above such oblique hints and stayed on for two more drinks. Anang left Manasi to look after the director and concentrated on unraveling the mysteries which had now escaped from the cigarette smoke and had wrapped around his shoes, the table top and the wall opposite. Anang was adept at reading balance sheets and figured that the pleasure of throwing the man out cannot make up for the pleasure of having Manasi out of his hair three hours every evening. He therefore kept quiet and decided to forget this black chapter of his life after sending him the deer next evening.

Tony reported exactly at ten the next day. A man of few words, Tony was unusually voluble today. He talked at length about wild life rules, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, endangered species and so on and finally gave out that deers simply cannot be had. Tony looked downcast and out of sorts and kept quiet when Anang gave him a piece of his mind. While taking leave he only said to himself, one could get filmstars from Bombay, but getting a deer was impossible.

Tony's failure made Anang realise the difficult task he had undertaken. He cancelled all his engagements for the day and set his mind to the problem of the deer. Tony had explained to him all the problems—one had to take a licence under the law to keep a deer as a pet; animals in the zoo are not allowed outside, etc. Anang rang up the Wild Life Ministry to find out if deers would be available somewhere. They did not know, but gave him the addresses of two institutions. He got the telephone number of one of the institutions and rang them up. They asked him the purpose and when he mentioned theatre, they threatened to sue him under Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. They asked for his name, but Anang put down the receiver.

The second institution did not have a telephone and so Anang found out their address and went there personally. The institution was located in a crowded street and in its only small room, there was a single chair sitting on which an old gentleman was trying his best to look busy. Anang asked him about a deer and the gentleman gave him a stack of literature about the antelope family. Anang looked for another chair to sit on, but the old man simply said that the office had just been opened and turned his face away. Anang ran through the booklets which gave much interesting information on stags, black bucks, swamp deers, barking deers, gazelles and moose, and got to know about the population of deers, which types had branched horns and so on. When he asked the old man as to where he could get a deer for a play, the old man expressed his ignorance and repeated that the office had just been opened. When Anang wanted to take leave, the gentleman asked him to sign the visitor's book. The office had indeed been opened just then, Anang noted, for there was only one signature in the visitor's book so far. While signing his own name on the book, Anang also noted that the other signature was Tony's.

After leaving the office, he left the driver and drove the car himself. He had suddenly remembered that once while driving in the suburbs, he had seen peacocks in some farm houses. He was hopeful that some people there might have deers too as pets and decided to make enquiries. Driving around the suburbs, Anang however could not locate any other pets except dogs and fowls. Finally he stopped in front of a farm house and asked a young boy if he had seen a deer which had been stolen from his house. The boy was clever and helpful, for he pointed out a house not far away. Anang went there and could not believe his luck when he found a beautiful spotted deer in a corner of the lawn. He ignored the 'Beware of Dogs' sign on the gate, entered inside and rang the door bell. Two things happened instantly. The door opened to reveal a military type man with severe mustachios, gun in hand, and the deer came running towards him barking like a dog. Though his recently acquired knowledge of deers was rather scant, Anang realised that it was no deer, but some exotic dog. He was quick witted and asked the gentleman the address of Captain Kumar and left in a hurry.

It was late evening when he returned home. He was cursing

the clever young boy all the way home and had rejected the thought of requesting the director to make do with a dog instead of a deer. When he reached home, Anang was surprised to find the Black Mountain sitting comfortably on his favourite sofa, glass in hand. Manasi was sprawled on the floor poring over a copy book. When Anang entered, Manasi got up in a huff and said rather reproachfully, "We could not do the rehearsals today because of you. Where is the deer?" Anang said, "You will have the deer on the day of the show; why do you need it for the rehearsals?" "What do you know of theatre?" Manasi snapped back, "Doug believes in Stanislavsky." Anang did not know what or who Stanislavsky was, but he guessed that it was a word through which theatre people kept all others out of their charmed circle. Anang could have retorted by reiterating his belief in Peter Drucker, but he was now in no mood for repartees. He chose to pick up a glass and go inside.

The director emptied his glass effortlessly and took charge of the copy book, which he now called the shooting script. The copy book had Manasi written in bold letters on the cover and the director had told her that after seeing her he had no doubts that only she could be the heroine of his film. This had impressed Manasi very much and when she found from the shooting script that her name had been substituted for the heroine's throughout, she had no doubts left in her mind about the director's sincerity. She started looking at the director with greater devotion and respect. Inspite of his doltish looks, the director was an intelligent fellow and knew that his film needed Manasi's backing. He therefore spent all his time after the rehearsals discussing his film project with her, and tried to impress her with technical cinema terms like freeze, okay shot and close up. He was now on first name terms with Manasi, and the director, whose real name was Durgadas was for her plain and simple Doug.

Next day Anang thought of two new plans for getting a deer. He put in an ad in the personal column of a newspaper: Deer Deer. The Deer Lovers' Club. Write with details of your deer P.O. Box, etc. Secondly, he did not go to the office, but drove to the biggest veterinary hospital and sat in his car on the road outside. Though the hospital was to open at nine, the watchman opened the gate only at nine forty-seven. He would have got bored but for the crowds of people walking on the road, whom Anang

found very fascinating. For the first time in his life, Anang was sitting purposeless at a place looking at people around him. He was looking at them from their own level, and not the second floor window of his airconditioned office from where everyone looked like a dwarf. This was a novel experience for Anang who discovered for the first time the colourful lives of ordinary folk.

The first creature entered the hospital gates at twelve minutes past ten. From his dress and demeanour, Anang figured that he was the doctor. As if the doctor's timing was known to everyone, a drove of patients followed within two minutes. The largest number of patients were dogs and the patient which caused no end of trouble to its owner to go inside was a donkey. At ten forty-three, the coming of patients suddenly stopped and Anang felt thirsty. There was no restaurant nearby from which one could keep a watch on the hospital gate. So Anang got down from the car and went to the makeshift tea stall and asked for a cup of tea. The tea which he was served in a chipped glass tumbler was unlike any that he had ever drunk. But Anang quite liked this special tea and in fact also picked up two cheap biscuits from the glass jar. He suddenly found a horse carriage stopping in front of the gate and rushed back to his picket. But there was no one in the carriage, and the man driving the carriage untethered the horse and took it inside.

At two he decided to call it a day, since he was tired and had a feeling that people had started looking at him a little suspiciously. The influx of patients had also stopped and so far the only creatures which had gone in were some cows which had come for artificial insemination, a number of dogs, a few squirrels and mongoose and a horse and a donkey. Among the patients there were none from the antelope family, not even a spotted dog resembling a deer. He had been unable to recognise only one animal—it was as big as a donkey, looked like a camel and trotted like a horse. Anang decided it was no deer and thought it was an okapi and finally left his watch post at 2 P.M.

The director was seated on his favourite sofa, beer mug in hand and Manasi was lying on the carpet, making notes on a piece of paper. When Anang entered the room, the director got up grudgingly and said "Hello" and invited him to have a beer.

Had he not been thirsty, Anang would have gone inside, but he took a beer instead and sat down. The director was in a happy mood today and instead of asking him about the deer, told him about his film project. Manasi also informed him of their decision to make the film and of their forthcoming visit to Bombay to sign actors and technicians. Manasi was a shareholder in Anang's business by virtue of her own paternal money and had absolute right to give away her money to scoundrels and scalawags. This fact was surely known to the director by now and so Anang preferred to keep quiet. He would have been happy to be left alone when they planned their film, but the director was not one to let him off so easily. He reminded Anang of the deer and told him that the rehearsals had been called off till they got the deer.

On the pretext of the deer, the director abandoned the play and concentrated on the film and spent hours with Manasi polishing and refining the script. Anang knew that this would go on till he found his deer, but he had failed to lay his hands on one inspite of his best efforts. Manasi now knew of Anang's helplessness and asked him now and then about the deer, though she did not seem to be interested in the play any longer. Anang had virtually given up all hopes of getting a deer, but he always assured Manasi that he would manage it soon. Though quite a few weeks had passed in the meantime, there had been no progress in his search. He had received only one letter for the imaginery Deer Lovers' Club. The letter was rather ironical so far as he was concerned, for it was from a Ramayana Society who were going to stage the epic and had enquired if they could get a deer from the club for their play.

Anang finally located a deer through a strange coincidence. A friend of his saw the small plaque on his table which read 'The buck stops here', seemed to remember something and telephoned someone about a deer and this made Anang prick up his ears. It seemed that his friend, who had many dogs, wanted to have a deer as a pet, but the gentleman who owned the deer was not willing to part with it for love or money. Anang told him of his problem and his friend agreed to ask the gentleman if he would be willing to lend the deer for the play. The gentleman agreed to the request and Anang's friend gave him the gentleman's address and telephone number and asked him to see him

any evening.

Anang rang up Manasi to give her the happy news, but she was not at home. That same evening Anang went in search of the gentleman who had the deer. His house was in a bylane in a crowded locality. When Anang reached there, the tumbledown small house was in darkness, there being a power failure. The gentleman, who was a clerk in a small office, took him inside and introduced him to his wife and son, as Anang surveyed the room. It was a one room apartment and the verandah served as the kitchen and Anang felt quite uncomfortable sitting in this small candle-lit room. When he finally mentioned the deer, they seemed to be a little disappointed since they had thought that the deer was to be used in a film. However, the gentleman asked his son to bring the deer.

There was no end to his happiness when Anang found that the creature the boy brought was indeed a deer. Anang touched its hooves, ears and horns to reassure himself and breathed a sigh of relief. It was agreed that he would pick up the deer the next day, but the lady of the house would not allow him to leave without a cup of tea. While making tea, she told him all about themselves, how long they have been here, where her sister was married, how many pets they had earlier, how the boy fared in the school and so on. Sipping his tea, Anang looked at the three of them. Though they were all sitting quietly, Anang found an unbroken dialogue of love and affection going on between father, mother and son. It was a strange form of communication which moved from the gentleman's eyes to his wife's and then on to the boy's and even reached him. He felt that in those few minutes, he had become quite close to the family.

Anang was happy not to find the director in the living room when he returned home, but his happiness was short-lived. Since the air-conditioner of the living room was not working, they were in the bedroom discussing the shooting script. When he told them of the deer, the director merely grunted and Manasi went over to the mirror to see her face in close-up. Anang told the director that they could start the rehearsals from the next day and he would reach the deer. The director did not seem very pleased and saying 'All right' went away.

That night they quarrelled, the excuse was their son in the boarding school. Anang and Manasi accused each other of not

writing to him. Anang threatened to bring him back from school and Manasi accused him of planning to ruin the future of the boy. The quarrel ended thus: Manasi threatened to go away to Bombay and Anang went to the living room without its air conditioning and started drinking.

Anang spent the next day in the office and started off in the evening to get the deer. The task was to him an unnecessary burden now, which he wanted to be done with. The place was in darkness like the other evening, but the gentleman and his son were waiting for him with their deer. With great difficulty they got the deer inside the car and reached the place of the rehearsals. Anang had thought of giving everyone a big surprise, but when they reached there, they found no one there. Angry, irritated and bitter, he came down and apologised to the gentleman and they all drove to Anang's house.

Manasi was not at home either. The servant informed him that she had left for the airport in the afternoon with a suitcase. Anang rang up the travel agents for a ticket to Bombay, packed a suitcase and came out. The deer was getting restless in the car, and the gentleman and his son were trying their best to pacify it. Anang got into the car and asked the driver to drop the gentleman at his house on the way to the airport.

The lights had come on when they reached the gentleman's place. His wife was waiting outside and greeted them heartily as if they were returning home after days. She was eager to hear about the rehearsals and was disappointed to learn that there were no rehearsals. The deer, which was quiet so far, suddenly became full of life and started jumping about. The lady was going to make tea for them, but when Anang said he would not have tea, the gentleman went out to bring cold drinks from the nearby shop. The lady remembered an unsuccessful play they had staged when she was a student, and expressed her hope that everything would be all right by the next day. The gentleman returned with the drinks and served everybody after first pouring a little into the deer's bowl. Anang was very tired now and surveyed the family as he sipped his drink. The gentleman told his wife how nicely the deer had behaved throughout, his wife remembered their pet dog which died the previous year, and the boy went and embraced the deer. Anang noted that it was time for him to leave to catch the plane and decided to

get up.

The lady said, "You must join us for supper," and the gentleman said, "Of course you must." The boy looked at Anang for his assent. Anang looked at all of them again. An electric current of familial love, which was flowing in the room sparking off the walls and touching the table and chair and the deer and all, touched him to the quick and he could not get up. At this moment Anang forgot Manasi, the director, the magic deer, his air-conditioned room, balance sheets and Tony. He snuggled into his chair, nodded his head in assent and said, "Thank you."

The Return

Madhuban glanced away from the faces of his fellow passengers and looked out through the window and was suddenly transported to his own childhood. The fast moving electric poles, trees, hamlets and market places acquired new mysteries and nudged the innermost corners of his mind. In the crowded railway station, his small fingers slipped from the grip of his father's hand and he started searching for his father looking through the jungle of legs of gigantic people. At this moment the platform started vibrating with life, the train steamed in with a demonic noise and the earth moved away from under Madhuban's feet. When everything balanced after the train stopped, Madhuban calmed somewhat. His father took his finger in his hand. . . .The gentleman sitting next to Madhuban tapped him on the shoulder and asked for a matchbox.

Passing on the matchbox to the gentleman, Madhuban mechanically pulled out a packet from his own pocket and took out a cigarette. As a reflex action his eyes looked at Seema's for approval. Seema's eyes were now on the cigarette in his fingers and they were blinking disapproval like the red traffic lights. Madhuban put away the cigarette in the packet and looked again at Seema. The eyes, slightly pacified now, had Shanti's face around them. They held out a threat to punish Madhuban for having dared to think of a smoke. His heart skipped a beat and in spite of his best efforts he could not check his coughing bout.

Madhuban looked out of the window again at the vanishing

landscape. The train seemed determined to take itself farther away from the land it was leaving behind and its every whistle was an announcement of a victory. He wished he could distance himself away from his past with its faces and memories and pass the streets of his childhood merrily whistling. To start with, he tried to forget the city he was just leaving behind after a three year stay. This was not the first time he was being transferred out, but he was determined at least to distance himself from his immediate past.

Madhuban tried to recall the day Shanti and he had arrived in the unfamiliar city. He had it mixed up again. It was not Shanti with him; it was Seema. Shanti had died four years earlier. It was a different city that Shanti and he had got into after a long train journey and that had happened quite a few years back. But to Madhuban, arriving in a new city with Seema was merely the repetition of an earlier event, like the needle stuck in the grooves of a record. For him, time was a cycle of repetitive events and life was a series of arrivals.

He had often embarrassed himself addressing Seema as Shanti and this caused a lot of unpleasantness. Madhuban would, however, be unrepentant for he considered this slip very natural. Though Seema was very different from Shanti in looks and conduct, he found no difference between the two in their relationship with him. Madhuban had got them both through similar rituals of a traditional wedding. The uneasy reticence of the first meeting, the slow search for each other's bodies and the mutual adjustments and finally the routines of domestic life had visited Madhuban with a relentless inevitability two times over. In her admonitions to Madhuban about smoking, in her protectiveness over him and above all, in the expressions of her sadness for being childless, Seema was a split image of Shanti.

There was a similar repetitiveness in Madhuban's office work, from one branch office of the bank to another and from one city to another city. There was a recurring tedium in the routine of additions and substractions and statistical tables. There was for Madhuban no difference between the cigar smoking cross-word puzzle addict Manager and the Manager who grew roses but did not smoke. They both were quite nice to him. For Madhuban, his entire service career was a monotonous series of reruns of a single working day with its ten to five timing, lunch

break, in and out trays, an occasional call from the boss, all these strung together with endless figures of rupees, paise, decimal points, and tens, thousands and millions.

Madhuban withdrew his glance from the last bright rays of the setting sun and looked around the compartment. A strange fear brought him shivers, for he had an uncanny feeling that he was familiar with all the faces and had known these people for years. He suddenly remembered another event. He was searching for a house in the new city of his posting and an elderly lady had opened the front doors of the house in response to his knock. He knew or rather felt that he had known the lady before. As he entered the door, he found himself familiar with the house, its rooms and corridors, as if he had lived in the house earlier or had seen it in a dream. Before he was shown round the house, he could see before his eyes the exact layout of the rooms and knew exactly where the staircase was leading. A similar feeling now engulfed him in the train compartment. He felt that he had taken an earlier journey to his new place of posting with the same passengers as now. He knew that a real or dreamt event of his past was going to recur and he could not stop it. He allowed himself to drift in the flow of this event.

The gentleman sitting next to him passed on the time table towards him and said, "I have misplaced my glasses, could you please find out when the train will reach the junction?" Madhuban turned the pages, and as predetermined, the gentleman said, "it must be in table number ten or eleven." Madhuban found out the time for him and the gentleman looked at his watch and said, "the train is running three hours behind schedule." As expected, the gentleman took out his flask and poured a cup of tea for Madhuban. Madhuban took the cup from his hand as if in a trance and the train at this moment made a sudden jolt. Tea spilt onto Seema's saree; she made a face and got up to go to the toilet. Exactly as on the earlier occasion.

Madhuban got a little frightened and remembered his father. His father had died years earlier but everytime Madhuban had a serious problem he called out to him to help him out. As a child when he had been told about God he had thought of Him as someone resembling his father. Though his father had gradually lost his omnipotence as Madhuban grew older, Madhuban would still seek for him in times of stress. At

this time, Madhuban saw his father in a white dhoti with a shawl around his shoulders, and his feet in wooden sandals. He seemed very pleased and was looking at Madhuban in benediction.

It was now dark outside and the lights had been switched on inside the compartment. The whole compartment was reflected in the window-panes creating a familiar yet mysterious world outside in the dark. Seema had dozed off with her head resting on the shoulder of the friendly stranger. The train was moving at a leisurely speed and there was silence inside. Madhuban took his face nearer the window-pane and peered outside, but could see nothing but the dense dark.

Madhuban had no anxious worries about going to the new city, for he knew exactly what sort of past was awaiting him there. He called to his mind the house he had seen from the train compartment after a lapse of several years. The house was in absolute darkness and the woman was standing in front of its only lighted window. He knew that this house was his destination. Madhuban called out to his father and surrendered his tired body to a haven of sleep, which was dense dark like the womb, but was full of infinite peace and many promises.

Renunciation

On the dusty uneven road, our car again got into a ditch and Derek bumped against me. He woke up and said, "Oh, hell" and went back to sleep. We had started very early in the morning, but it was quite hot now and the drive on the bad patch of road was very slow. We were still to go a long distance to reach the ashram.

I was doing a research work on illustrated Bhagavata Purana manuscripts and Derek was the assistant keeper of the eastern manuscripts section of an American museum. We had got to know each other through correspondence and were now going in search of a rare manuscript. Some folios of the manuscript were in various museums of Europe and the US and the remaining eighty pages were in the collection of Swami Dharmanand's Ashram museum. This was a valuable manuscript not only for research, but in terms of money too. In the antique shops, each folio of this manuscript was valued at nine hundred US dollars.

I first got to know of this manuscript from Derek's letter. I was in correspondence with various museums for my research work and Derek had informed me that they had only three folios of a manuscript, but the best part of the manuscript was in India itself. That was my introduction to Derek, who was keenly interested in Indian art, had studied Hindi and wrote research articles in magazines. He visited India regularly to learn Indian languages and to work on Indian art.

I would not have known about the rare manuscript but for Derek's letter. Though the Ashram was only a hundred miles

.rom our University, I had received no replies to my letters to the Swamiji. I had also been deferring my visit to the Ashram because there were no regular means of transport to the place. When Derek wrote to me that he was coming to India and would be visiting the Ashram, I decided to go there with him.

My first meeting with Derek was indeed interesting. When I reached the airport, the plane had landed and the passengers had come into the lounge. From his letters and his writings, I had a mental picture of Derek and walked over to the elderly and donnish looking gentleman in gold framed spectacles only to be told that he was not Derek. As I was looking round, it was Derek who came to me. The hippie looking bearded man who had been on his hands and knees searching for his camera cap was Derek. The first thing I noticed was that he was very young. He had a camera on one shoulder and a sling bag on the other and he told me that this was all the luggage he carried. We checked up about his return ticket and then I took him to the University guest house, where I had arranged for his stay.

In his personal life, Derek was as disorganised and clumsy as he was systematic and neat in his research work. His room was an example of how to fill up an entire room with the contents of a sling bag. Various attachments of the camera were lying about on the floor and his papers were kept all over the room. There was a rare miniature painting lying between his tooth brush and the shaving cream. There was a photograph of some sadhu fixed to the wall with cellophane tape and there were lighted agarbatties under it. He was to stay here for three days and had planned it all one year in advance. He was to work one day in the university museum, one day in the language laboratory and the last day was meant for a visit to the Swamiji. On the first day itself, he had become quite an attraction in the university, because of his funny dress and he collected a crowd when he practised yoga on the guest house lawn early in the morning.

There was a lot to learn from Derek. He knew little about many commonplace things and had no interest in many matters like politics. He never bothered about newspapers and could no give even some basic information about American life and societ) But when it came to Indian art and language he knew his subject During discussions about art, he would become a different person.

He listened carefully to everyone and whatever he himself said was in well-chosen words. In spite of his funny dress, his bohemian looks and his youth, he would in those few minutes look like a learned professor. I and my friends in the university, did have a lot to learn from Derek so far as devotion to work was concerned.

Derek had many other good qualities. He was a vegetarian and ate very little. He could go to sleep anywhere and preferred the bare floor. One night when it was very hot, he slept on the lawn itself. On his second evening in the guest house, a friend of ours who had just returned from a visiting professorship in the USA had called us for dinner and the hostess had a real problem giving Derek a vegetarian meal. Derek simply did not seem to fit into the gathering and I had to bring Indian art into our discussions to make him feel at ease. He was quite excited so long as art was being discussed, but fell silent when the discussions moved to another subject. After the party, I went to the guest house to see him off.

On entering his room, Derek lighted the incense sticks and suddenly said, "I have decided to renounce everything and take sanyas." When he said that, I was sitting near his table and looking at his passport which was lying open. In the photograph in the passport, he did not have a beard and he was properly dressed in coat and tie. I could not connect the photograph with Derek now, as I heard him mention renunciation. I looked at Derek who was now sitting crosslegged with his eyes closed under the picture of the sadhu and wondered if this was his way of reaching sanyas. I wanted to talk to him, but he seemed to be lost in meditation and I left him sitting there.

I, too, was thinking of renouncing the world at that time. When one does not have the burden of responsibilities and has free time on his hands, one thinks of a lot of strange things. Many philosophical questions bother the mind and the very existence seems meaningless. At such moments, I often thought of giving up my research work and renouncing the world. But such ideas were rather vague in my mind and I never gave them serious thought. Now, after hearing of Derek's decision, I also thought of sanyas, a state of renunciation in which there are no desires no attachments no aversions no loathings no sorrow no excitement no regrets and no memories.

Next morning, we hired a car and started off for the ashram. But for a small town half-way, there were no habitations along the road to the Swamiji's ashram and the road was bad and bumpy. It is while driving on this road that Derek had told me about the Swamiji. He considered Swamiji to be a true saint and wanted to be initiated into sanyas by him. Swamiji had given him a mantra for meditation, and sitting in the car Derek from time to time closed his eyes to recite the mantra, and went off to sleep in between.

When the car gave a jolt this time, Derek woke up with a start and sat up. The June sun was very hot even at nine in the morning and the road was lonely and the country side bleak. Derek showed me a truck driving ahead. It was loaded with blocks of ice and a young boy was playing with small chunks of ice which he broke out of the blocks. When the ice melted in his hands, he would take another piece and play with it. He was lost in his own play, as if everything else in the world was irrelevant and meaningless. "I wish I could be like this boy," Derek said, "playing with bits of ice and forgetting the whole world!"

The road now became more dusty and with great difficulty we overtook the truck with its load of ice and the earnest boy. It was after four long hours of dust and deserted road and Derek's swearing that the car took a right turn to show a sign board with an arrow mark which said:

Swami Dharmanandji Maharaj
Gurukul Ashram—Kanyashram

A short while later we could see the ashram through the clump of trees, and reached its gate. The man waiting for us took us inside. The ashram buildings sprawled over a large area and there was a high wall surrounding the premises. We were taken through various buildings and corridors to the Swamiji's presence and Derek prostrated himself before him. Swamiji asked us to sit down and offered us the customary glass of water. He then showed us his book 'Sacred Symbols in Indian Art' and Derek immersed himself in the book. I was getting impatient about the Purana manuscript and sensing it, Swamiji opened the box near him and handed me the stack of painted sheets.

My joy knew no bounds when I looked at the folios, for they

were essential to my work. Swamiji called an assistant and asked him to take me to another room where I could have a quiet look at the manuscript. As I followed him to the next room, I looked at the man. He was a muscular man, clean shaven and sharp featured and seeing him I suddenly thought of Hanuman, the monkey god. As I went through the folios, Hanuman sat near me and volunteered to explain the text and the illustrations.

I was surprised at the erudition of Hanuman, for he seemed to know a great deal about Indian art and literature. Inspite of my years of research on the subject, I considered myself a novice before him and I closed my notebook to listen to him. Suddenly Swamiji called him and Hanuman went out. I went through the folios and took some photographs and when I came out, I found Swamiji and Derek standing outside.

I looked around the ashram buildings. Where we were was the kanyashram, the school for girls. The boys' school was separated from this portion by a high boundary wall. All the students and teachers of the girls' school, children included, were dressed in white saris and blue blouses. Except the Swamiji, Hanuman and two acolytes, no other man was allowed on this side. Swamiji had an ochre loincloth on him, but Hanuman and the two acolytes wore white pajamas and vests. There were beautiful flower gardens inside the ashram and many fruit-bearing trees, and deer and peacocks moved about adding colour to this idyllic set-up.

Swamiji invited us to see his art collection and Hanuman brought the keys and opened the door of the museum. The museum was another surprise for me, for it housed many rare pieces of art and one would never have imagined such a rich collection in this remote place. Hanuman showed us round and I noted that he knew each and every piece in the museum. He took us round the library which had many rare books and I was indignant that no one was making any use of the museum or library. Or rather, it was only Hanuman who seemed to make use of the collection, for I was now convinced that Hanuman had read each and every book in the library and was familiar with each piece of art. When he was showing us round, he was a personification of modesty, though what he said was profound and learned. He seemed to shrink before the Swamiji and behaved like a humble servant of his.

We were now called to lunch and it was Hanuman who brought in our plates. The ashram functioned according to real or imagined Indian traditions and there was no salt in the food. I had difficulty eating the saltless diet but took it that this training will help me in attaining sanyas. I however found that Derek finished his food with relish. After the meal, Swamiji took Derek into his room and closed the door from inside. They were perhaps going to discuss the details of Derek's initiation into a life of renunciation, I thought. I looked for Hanuman, but he was also not to be seen. The best I could do was to take a walk in the orchard and try to photograph the peacocks.

I ran after a peacock to photograph it, but it kept eluding me and refused to be caught in my lens. Finally I gave up the chase and decided to sit down and look at the peacock, which was now at a safe distance from me and had started dancing with its feathers fanned out. The weather was pleasant now and I looked up at the sky to find clouds floating about. The clouds, the green trees and the suggestion of rain had created a relaxed atmosphere and I do not know when I dozed off sitting under the tree. I also had a fascinating dream during my short nap. I saw the girls of the ashram transformed into peacocks and running about the garden in their white and blue uniforms. I also saw Derek in a clown's robe hopping after them, camera in hand and Hanuman roaring with laughter as he sat on the topmost branch of the tree.

I snapped out of my dream to find a young girl sitting near me and got into conversation with her. The kanyashram had strange rules; girls once admitted were not allowed to go out of the school till they finished their studies. Girls would therefore stay in the school for ten to twelve years at a stretch and it was only once in a while that a member of their family would come and meet them. Most of the girls were from very poor families and had come from long distances, and once admitted in the school were virtually cut off from their families. The girls were not allowed to go outside the ashram boundaries and the Swamiji was very strict about this discipline.

The girl looked to me both happy and sad at the same time and I could not decide whether to sympathise with her or feel happy. Finally I sent her to call Hanuman and it is only then that I knew that he was known as Brahmachari here. When

Brahmachari came to me, I got to know more about the ashram from him.

Swami Dharmanand was born into a rich family and had left home at the age of sixteen. After the death of his parents he had inherited the property and had started the ashram, and in course of time had enlarged its activities through donations. He had profound knowledge of ancient Indian religion and culture and had edited several old scriptures. He wanted to train boys and girls in the ancient Indian traditions and had set up the ashram schools. He had strict rules of discipline for the students and enforced them ruthlessly. He personally supervised the working of the school and the hostels and himself never went out. The boys' and girls' schools, though side by side, had nothing to do with each other and the schools were separated by a high wall with spikes.

There had been only one instance of deviant behaviour among students in the long history of the ashram. Inspite of all precautions, a boy and girl had fallen in love. Since the gate of the girls' school remained locked at night, it was the girl who had to scale the boundary wall to come to the boys' section, from where they ran away. The police had brought them back after two days and they had been subjected to severe chastisement. At the end of it all a general assembly had been called where the girl was to admit her misconduct and beg for forgiveness. The girl had broken down by then and everyone expected her to do as she was told. But before the assembly the girl affirmed in no uncertain words that whatever she had done was right and proper. Swamiji's face turned red and he started trembling in anger as he heaped curses on the girl. But the boy and the girl again ran away after two days, this time in broad daylight through the main gate. After they left there was a mock funeral of the two by burning their effigies, and the ashram regulations were made stricter.

Brahmachari narrated the entire episode to me without any excitement as if he himself had no personal views on the behaviour of the boy and the girl or the wrath of the Swamiji. He himself had been a student of the ashram. He was the youngest of three brothers in a poor family. He was very good in Sanskrit and so his brothers had sent him to Swami Dharmanand. He had completed his studies here and had thereafter been engaged

to look after the library. Swamiji wanted his library to be the biggest in the state and bought many books. It was Brahmachari who made full use of the library and wrote many research articles. I had a feeling that the book on sacred symbols was Brahmachari's work though it bore Swamiji's name as author. When I asked Brahmachari, he merely said, the name does not matter; what is important is the contents of the book. He also added that the Swamiji was like his father.

His mention of a father-son relationship solved many of my doubts. Brahmachari did a lot of odd jobs for the ashram, but unlike others, he took no remuneration. He had no contact with his own family and the ashram was his whole world and living in the ashram he was free from all worries.

From the garden, we went back to Swamiji. Derek and he were standing outside, waiting for me to join them for going round the school. We had hardly gone a few steps when the dust storm started. The sky became gray and dust filled the air. The landscape, with its trees and flowers and peacocks, seemed to lose all colour and turn drab and dreary like a bad black and white photograph. I thought Swamiji would go back to his room, but he led us to the class rooms of the girls' school, through the wind and dust.

It soon started raining and the dust storm subsided. The sky was overcast with dark clouds and lightening sparked. As we went round the classes, there was a gong. It was time for prayers and the girls came out to the courtyard to line up for the common prayer. The prayer had just begun when the rains became torrential and the thunder and the downpour drowned the voices. The rain water now formed rivulets in the courtyard and rain lashed the buildings. We sat on the verandah and looking at the hazy drenched figures of the girls and listening to the muted prayer song, I had the feeling of a surreal happening.

We came back to Swamiji's room when the prayers ended. We had finished our work and wanted to get back soon since Derek had to catch the flight the next morning. As soon as the rain subsided a little, we took leave of Swamiji. He sent Brahmachari with us as he had in any case to come to our town to get a cement permit for extension of the ashram buildings. Swamiji was always concerned about the expansion of the ashram activities and was busy collecting donations to add new wings. Swamiji

had asked Brahmachari to get back with the permit in a day or two, for work had been held up on account of cement.

The road had become very bad after the rains and our car drove at a snail's pace. Derek did not seem to be happy even after his long conversation with Swamiji. He was quiet and thoughtful. Suddenly he asked Brahmachari, "Have you been able to attain sanyas?" Brahmachari laughed and said, "Don't you see my white dress? I am yet to renounce everything and earn my right to the ochre dress. And I do not think I will ever get them; I have so many failings." When I asked him, he told me how he could not stick to all the disciplines required of a sanyasin. Like having his head clean shaven. Swamiji shaved his head everyday, but Brahmachari could never keep to the daily routine. He even brought a pair of hawai chappals the previous summer after going barefeet for twenty-five years. While Swamiji was bare feet and bare body, Brahmachari had a shirt on for he was going to the city. Derek, who was particular about his vegetarianism, asked Brahmachari about his food habits. While in the ashram, Brahmachari took the ashram food, but when travelling, he could not get salt free food, he took whatever he got to eat and what is more relished it. Once he even took potatoes out of the fish curry in a friend's house, because there was nothing else. Swamiji was very strict in these matters. No wonder he was a true Sanyasin, and Brahmachari was far from it.

Brahmachari again regretted that he would never be able to attain sanyas, but said that he was quite happy and content serving Swamiji. Derek closed his eyes and became thoughtful again. He was either thinking of newer ways of achieving sanyas or else was worried about the flight next morning. I started wondering if it would be worth giving up salt in one's effort to attain sanyas.

It was still raining heavily and had become dark too and the driver said that he had to stop. We coaxed him to drive on at least upto the town which came midway, so that we could spend the night there. The twenty minute drive to the place took a full hour and a half and by the time we reached there, all shops had closed. Brahmachari directed the driver to a street where we stopped the car and Brahmachari got down and went in search of his friend who lived there. Finally we all got into his friend's small two room house to wait out the night. His friend was

suffering from fever and while Brahmachari looked after him, we tried to sleep in the outer room.

In a short while Brahmachari joined us and went off to sleep right away on the bare floor. Derek and I could not sleep in the strange place and lying down waited for the rain to cease. The rain did cease after a couple of hours and when we came out there was even a moon in the sky. The driver was already awake and was sitting inside the car smoking a cigarette. We decided to start immediately so that Derek could catch his morning flight. We went in to wake Brahmachari up, but he was already awake. He said he would stay back to look after his friend. Derek reminded him of the cement permit, but Brahmachari told him that for him his friend was more important. When we got into the car taking leave of Brahmachari, I said to Derek, "Brahmachari will never reach sanyas."

The story should have ended with our leaving the strange sleepy city at a mysterious moonlit hour, but fate had it otherwise. The journey had a more dramatic ending. Just as we were entering our city, the driver dozed off and the car hit the traffic island. I woke up with a start and felt myself all over to confirm that I had not broken any limbs. I got down from the car and found Derek getting down on the other side. The driver was screaming, but he too had got down and I could see that he was unhurt. His scream was only to get our sympathy. We rebuked him even then and he tried to start the car, but the engine had conked. We paid his dues and he argued a little and as we reasoned with him, he remembered his imaginery injuries and started screaming again.

It was dawn now and there was no hope of getting any other conveyance at that time. We figured that we could walk back, Derek to the airport and I to the university. Our roads parted here itself and Derek asked me not to come with him and picked up his bag. I was very tired, but the university was not far. I shook hands with Derek and before going on watched him take the road to the airport. He was walking briskly ahead. But the person I was seeing now was not the bearded Derek of bizarre dress and bohemian manners; I was seeing the Derek of the passport picture, clean shaven and neatly dressed, walking, brief case in hand, between high rise buildings of a crowded American city.

The Reality

Padmadhar looked at his watch. What had seemed to him to be half an hour was in reality only seven minutes. As if to spite him, time too was moving at a slow pace. He looked for his lawyer, but he was also not to be seen. The court routine was however continuing uninterrupted as before and the statement of a witness was still being recorded.

This was his second date in the court. The outcome of the case was already known to him. His lawyer had made it clear that he had to finally quit the rented house, but he could possibly postpone the inevitable, by two or three years may be, by fighting this case in the court of law. Padmadhar also knew that before the stay of these two or three years ran out, he would have been transferred out of this town and there would be no need for a house. Despite this knowledge, Padmadhar had to pass through the various stages of the process of law.

Padmadhar's lawyer was an ace in the art of delaying the proceedings. It was in Padmadhar's interest to have as many dates in the court as possible, the lawyer would tell him, and would ask him now and then either to file an affidavit or to seek a fresh date feigning illness. Padmadhar had even to take leave from the college in order to establish the lie of illness with a perfect alibi.

Till six months after the case was filed, no dates had been fixed by the court, thanks to the wizardry of his lawyer. However, his lawyer would often come and obtain his signatures on a variety of papers. Padmadhar was happy as long as he was not

required to go to the court. But a time finally came when the date could no more be postponed. One evening, the lawyer's agent informed him that they had to appear in the court the next morning.

This was Padmadhar's first experience of being inside a courtroom. On the appointed day, he grabbed an early lunch, took leave from the college and reached the lawyer's house, from where they proceeded to the court. In the court, the lawyer again took his signature on various papers. The magistrate who was to try their case had his chamber on the first floor. The lawyer took him there and leaving him in the room went away to attend to some other case. The magistrate had not yet come, but Padmadhar observed that the courtroom rituals went on relentlessly without pause. The witnesses, the police, the convicts, the lawyers and their lackeys all moved about as if in a hurry. A liveried peon kept on switching stacks of files from one side of the table to the other and people were signing away on sheets of paper. It looked like some sort of a carnival where those who came to seek justice were caught in a snare of trivia and went away taking with them objects like court fee, stamp paper, dates, *vakalatnama* or a summon, for the real thing.

On the first date that Padmadhar was here, all these had appeared novel and interesting and the ritual of the courtroom had not been such a drag. The magistrate had not yet materialised in the courtroom although it had already travelled word to mouth that he had arrived and was in his chamber already.

Padmadhar had naturally inferred that the magistrate was perhaps awfully pre-occupied in his chamber with matters relating to such serious crimes as murder, abduction or rape. It was impertinent on bis part to have filed in the court of such a heavy weight his wafer thin case of a rented house, he thought.

Right at this moment of realisation his lawyer arrived in a breathless strut. The lawyer was quite a picture, red betel juice flowing out from the corners of his mouth and the black coat spotted white with sweat. Padmadhar sat up thinking that his case would perhaps now be taken up. But the lawyer only informed him that the magistrate would not turn up for the day. After parting with this piece of information, the lawyer started bargaining with the court clerk for a fresh date. After that was done, he whispered into Padmadhar's ears the impending date,

and brushing away imaginary flecks of dust from his spotted coat, he moved away in a hurry.

While leaving the courtroom, Padmadhar peeped into the room called the magistrate's chamber. The 'chamber' was dirty, dingy and dark. He could make out bundles of frayed paper yellowed with age lying on the table, a dry pitcher, a broken tumbler, a reclining inkpot, and an old calendar, all lying in a state of utter disarray. A chair in the chamber had only three legs, the fourth one made up by a stack of broken bricks. Disappointed by what he saw, Padmadhar started having doubts about the authority this magistrate wielded. But remembering the superlatives with which his lawyer had described the magistrate, Padmadhar allayed his doubts and conjectured that beyond this hole of a room there was the real 'chamber', a fabulous and beautiful habitat of the dispenser of justice.

On the second date, Padmadhar missed his bus and reached the court a little late. He began searching for his lawyer a little guiltily, as he was afraid that the lawyer may now accuse him for being late. But the lawyer was nowhere to be seen. Padmadhar felt a little relieved and sitting relaxed on the last bench in the courtroom, tried to absorb himself in the proceedings of the case in progress at that time. The judge was dozing on a chair, the electric fan over his head was rotating with loud clatters and creaks and the defence counsel was talking in a loud voice to drown the din with his submissions. The case appeared to be interesting since words like the other man, chastity and divorce were being hurled around at regular intervals and the audience was responding with timely giggles.

The child in the witness box appeared dazed and a little wilted in this hostile surrounding. The judge looked at the child in grave concentration, if not in anger, and that made the child shrivel further in his misery. The counsel for the defence was directing the sharp arrows of his questions at the child like a skilled archer. A seasoned witness could perhaps have dodged these, but the child was being repeatedly wounded with the arrowheads. Padmadhar was watching the proceedings in a fit of absentmindedness when a sudden explosion of laughter alerted him. The lawyer was asking the child to narrate what his mother and the other man did after the light was switched off. As if the defence lawyer was waiting for this question, he jumped up

abruptly shouting 'objection, milord' and started his interjection in a monotone. The audience, deprived of a lively narrative, appeared dejected and the courtroom reverberated with their irritation and disappointment. Padmadhar left the courtroom amidst this confusion and came down. Fortunately he discovered his lawyer standing at the foot of the staircase. The lawyer informed him that his case would be taken up only later in the day.

Padmadhar started strolling in front of the make-shift shops on the roadside near the court, in a bid to while away the time. The shops held out wares which were out of this world and generally not available in the regular shops. To give only a few examples, one shop was selling instant recipes for conquering death and regaining the vitality of youth and the shopkeeper was addressing himself to a thin audience on the implications of night pollution and loss of erectile powers. This shop had its match in a shop that extolled the rare virtues of such rare exotica as the nail of tiger, milk of camel, blood of the *kochilakhai*, scales of the *vajrakapta* and the oil of the *krikalas*. Just beside these shops was the fortune teller directing his pet parrot to pick out the client's fortune from among a set of cards neatly arranged in a row beneath the picture of a human palm crisscrossed with tell-tale lines. While the parrot was determining the fate of men, the man selling anti-poison tincture was demonstrating the efficacy of his ware by getting himself stung by a domesticated scorpion and alternatively falling dead and reviving himself with the tincture. In yet another shop a benevolent shopkeeper was giving away priceless stones and jewels at throw away prices. Padmadhar who was in no mood for these went to a bookshop nearby and started browsing. Beneath stacks of pornography were old books and he picked out a book from these, a book that suited his present predicament. The book was titled 'The Trial', and its author was someone called Franz Kafka.

Padmadhar took his position again in the last bench in the courtroom amidst an eager audience and tried to read the book. He could not. The proceedings of the courtroom had now struck a dull patch and the audience was gradually thinning out. The prosecution lawyer was releasing his blunt arrows in utter disinterest, and the witness was dodging them with ease. A postman was now standing in the witness box and the lawyer's questions

related to the delivery of love letters to the woman. The defence lawyer was raising technical points relating to the terminology used in the postal regulations, and this had made the proceedings duller still. Padmadhar closed the book and looked at his watch. What had seemed to him to be half an hour was in reality only seven minutes.

Since the court proceedings had become dull, Padmadhar now decided to depend on his imagination. He fixed a wig on the bald pate of the judge and got the ceiling fan replaced by a hand-pulled *punkha*. He converted the court peon into a guardsman. He stripped the postman of his khaki outfit and made him hold a jingling stick like the runners of the olden times. He painted the faces of the lawyers red, so that they resembled the white sahibs. He got the courtroom surrounded by a platoon of mounted soldiers. The court was now deciding a case pertaining to the Sepoy revolt and the arguments related to a letter of Tatya Tope.

Perfect set-up, yet it was not quite to his satisfaction. Since Padmadhar had only perfunctory knowledge of the Sepoy revolt, he now tried to bring the incident closer to the present. He removed the wig from the judge's head, switched on the electric fan and put costumes back on every one. Now the lawyer was asking the postman about the delivery of the letter received from Naxalbari. As if the defence lawyer was waiting for this, he jumped abruptly shouting 'objection, milord' and started his interjection in a monotone. Exactly at this moment, a bomb exploded in the courtroom and an agitated crowd surrounded the court. Some of them entered the courtroom guns in hand and started shouting that they had no faith in this system of law and justice.

Padmadhar wanted to see the events with a little more clarity. But his tiredness, the irritation born out of waiting, the sound of the moving fan overhead and the noon time, all made a slumberous brew and he dozed off. From his reclining position on the bench, he found the judge converted into a wooden puppet with the string tied to his hands vanishing in the ceiling. The lawyers were going on with their pantomime like walkie-talkie dolls and the witness was babbling inanities. There was the sound of a donkey braying in the chamber and a vulture was circling above the court building. A dark cloud suddenly entered the

courtroom through the open window and covered the entire courtroom in darkness.

Someone nudged him and Padmadhar woke up with a start. He found that the judge had since left and the courtroom had become almost empty. He could not find his lawyer and ascertained the next date from the court-clerk. While coming down the staircase, he remembered that his wife had asked him to buy her some sleeping tablets. He reminded himself of this responsibility and came on the road. All the shops had already been closed except for the book shop. He sold away the book he had bought in the morning and quickly reckoned that he had not incurred much of a loss.

He still had a lot of time on his hands and so he decided to walk home instead of taking the bus. He was on leave from the college for that day. He worried for a while wondering if his leave application had reached the right quarters in time, but then decided to forget about it. That he could come out like this once in a while from the routine of the college was in itself a relief. Each lecture in the college was a drab experience for him. His students were least interested in the subjects he was teaching. During his lectures his students remained completely unmindful and busied themselves in gossip. Padmadhar however fulfilled his teaching duties with as loud a voice as he could muster. In those depressing moments, he would often imagine a glass screen between him and his students. Sometimes, when the class became unbearable, he would turn this glass partition into a thicker and opaque one so that he could keep himself away from the delirium of noise.

Padmadhar now cleaned up a corner of this glass barrier and looked at the girls' bench. He softened his voice and mellowed the expression on his face. But the girls were engaged in a serious discussion over some juicy titbit in a film magazine and Padmadhar failed to draw their attention. Having thus been frustrated in his effort, he forced himself to abandon the idea of fixing a permanent window on the glass screen and brought back his face and his voice to normal.

His sole pleasant experience in college was Vasudha. His introduction to Vasudha was rather commonplace, yet this small non-event was for Padmadhar the most glorious moment in his life. The story of his acquaintance with Vasudha, the eventful

non-event was this, that years back, while leaving the classroom after taking a tutorial class, Padmadhar found Vasudha sitting alone in the classroom. Vasudha was not exceptionally pretty and Padmadhar had not noticed her earlier. Yet, this girl sitting alone in an empty classroom appeared to him uncommon and mysterious. Padmadhar did not know how to begin the conversation since this was his first such experience. The girl broke the ice by showing him a book and asking him to explain a certain paragraph in it.

Everything inside his head got disarranged. His throat dried up. His feet went limp and his hands trembled. When he looked at the book, the alphabets acquired a life of their own and started fleeting over the page. Padmadhar mumbled a few disjointed words while wiping beads of sweat from his face. He found it almost impossible to explore the meaning hidden in the complex paragraph the girl wanted him to explain. The girl's face had now a pleasant flush and picking up the book from Padmadhar's hand, she moved out of the classroom. And that was all.

But this small incident kept Padmadhar occupied for days. By this time he had found out the name and address of the girl and this knowledge helped him in his thoughts of the girl. While recounting the event in a flashback, he could edit it and add the magic of sound to the silent film. For example, he could convert Vasudha's coming into the classroom into a dramatic entry, and could visualise Vasudha even more glamorised than a filmstar. In his imagination, Vasudha after entering the classroom would fold her hand in salutation to Padmadhar and would sit right in front of him in the first bench. Needless to say, Padmadhar would be dressed in his best and there would be a flush of that strange happiness on his face. Sometimes Padmadhar even converted the classroom into a park and altered the settings without a hitch.

In course of time Padmadhar became more daring in his imagination. He now addressed Vasudha as Sudha only and did not hesitate to take her out to a movie. He could now confidently place his hand on Vasudha's in the darkened cinema hall and imagine the two of them playing the hero and heroine on the screen. His intimacy with Vasudha also grew and he decided to take her to a hill station. He weighed the comparative merits

of various tourist spots and while doing so he did not forget the city of Paris he had seen in a picture.

Walking alone on the street, he now tried to remember his plans for a sojourn with Vasudha. But a possibility that had once appeared within reach in the tutorial classroom appeared to be eluding his grasp in the narrow lanes of the city after a tiring day. He disengaged himself forcibly from the view of a drug store on the street corner and fixed his eyes on the names of two filmstars etched in neon signs up in the sky. He did not like it and so he wiped out those names and wrote down his and Vasudha's names instead. While staring at the freshly written neon-sign with great satisfaction, he dropped dhar and Va, thereby leaving only Padma-Sudha. This also seemed a little odd somewhere and so he wiped off the hyphen in a jiffy.

By this time he was already on a different road, away from the road that led to his house. This road led to Vasudha's house and he kidded himself to believe that he was actually in search of a rented house and so had taken this road. Somebody had given him a tip once that a house without its lights on in the evening is quite often a house to let. So be it. It was winter and so the lights had come on in the houses earlier than usual. The road was not quite unfamiliar to Padmadhar. He had traversed it on some pretext or other many a times before, although he could never muster sufficient courage to enter Vasudha's house. But today only Vasudha's house was in darkness and at that very moment he discarded the supposed logical link between darkness and the availability of the house for rent.

Just when he was about to catch a bus to return home, he remembered about the sleeping tablets. There was no drug store nearby and so he purchased a few aspirin tablets instead from the pan shop. He ripped off the foil, wrapped the tablets carefully in a plain paper and put them in his pocket. Padmadhar now felt very tired but rather relieved that yet another day had passed. He figured that he still had half an hour to reach home, fifteen hours to the next class, twenty seven days to the third date in the court and at least two years to leave the rented house. Contrariwise, he had left Vasudha's house seven minutes behind, the evening show of the film was one and half hours behind, and the Sepoy revolt more than a hundred years behind.

He entered his house which he found quite warm after his

stroll in the cold outside. He ate his usual dinner, glanced through the newspaper and went to bed, going through each action mechanically. His wife was already asleep, deep in a slumber after taking the tablets which were actually not sleeping tablets. Lying on the bed, Padmadhar thought of the day just spent and taking the cue of that thought, reached Vasudha's house. This time, the lights were on in the house and there was nobody in the house excepting Vasudha. She sat close to him and Padmadhar closed his eyes in ecstasy. But with his eyes closed he could only visualise his wife in his arms. To get out of this unwanted experience, he opened his eyes and switched off the light before taking Vasudha in an embrace.

When Padmadhar opened his eyes again, he found his arm lying on his sleeping wife. This time he closed his eyes carefully and cautiously, and stretched his hand towards Vasudha.

Words

Right from our college days we knew that Bhavnath would one day become insane. Even in those days he was writing poems and fancied himself to be passionately in love. It is true that every student in college writes poems and believes himself to be in love, but Bhavnath was different; he was a serious type of person and was also very talkative at the same time. When friends left the tea shop bored with his talk, he would stay on to harangue the manager. He had no close friends, but he was friendly with most of us.

We never thought much of Bhavnath's poetry. He wrote strange poems and it was no surprise that these were not published anywhere. I remember the day when Bhavnath came to the tea shop all excited and showed us his first published poem. He pulled a chair and joined our table and recited the poem. The poem was but six lines long and was titled "Ascent-Descent."

Grass Banyan tree
Ant Elephant
Man God.
God Man
Elephant Ant
Banyan tree Grass.

This was all there was to the poem. Had the poem not been published in a reputed journal, we would have laughed off his literary effort as we did his philosophising. But he was now the

only published poet of our college and we had to suffer his discourse. He told us of the efforts involved in writing even a short poem and how he had spent six long months writing the six line poem. He went on to explain to us how the ascent was not merely from grass to banyan tree, but was also from grass to ant and ant to man. He brought in Darwin's theory of natural selection and cited Eliot and Pound to tell us what good poetry was.

We could not laugh at him this time and I think some of us who had dreams of becoming famous poets were rather jealous of Bhavnath. As we were getting up, some one made the mistake of asking him why he wrote such a straight poem with simple words instead of making the poem obscure as modern poets did. Bhavnath seemed prepared for the question. From his bag—needless to say, he was the only poet in the college who dressed like one and carried a shoulder bag—he pulled out a thesaurus and showed us the entry under vermin. He told us why he rejected words like pismire and picked on ant, and gave us a short lecture on modern poetry.

After the publication of the poem, Bhavnath started behaving like a celebrity and grew a beard. Though no other poem of his got published, he had earned recognition in the college as a poet. He was now pulling out the dictionary from his bag at the slightest provocation and entered into long arguments about the meaning and use of words. He cited Rigveda (through sacrifice the wise followed the trail of the Word and found that she had entered the hearts of the Rishis) and Bible (the Word was God) alike to explain his devotion to words.

When we left college after the final examinations, addresses had been exchanged, but it did not take long to lose contact with each other. We all got into various professions and I was posted to another city. I came across Bhavnath's poems in magazines from time to time and took it that he too must have taken a job somewhere and was writing poetry as a hobby. His poems were obscure for me and knowing him as I did, I never took his poems seriously.

Coming home during vacations, I sometimes came across old friends and got news of Bhavnath. He was working in a newspaper office and had earned some reputation as a poet. One day I rang up the newspaper office and asked for Bhavnath and he seemed very happy to hear from me. We decided to meet in the

college canteen the same evening.

I reached there first and surveyed the canteen. The place must have been the same as before, but to me it now looked smaller, darker and dirtier. I was wondering if this was due to my living in a different world when Bhavnath arrived. He looked and behaved the same as before and as we ordered tea explained that he was delayed on account of a prolonged argument with his editor about a word. I braced myself for a lecture on the significance of words, but Bhavnath kept quiet, for he had apparently not got over the incident in his office. I looked at him a little closely now. He was the same old Bhavnath, looking a little bit like a poet and a little bit like a mad man. When I met my other friends, we would discuss our health, our families, children's schooling and the price of things, but Bhavnath was the only one I discovered with whom I could go back to my college days and chat about the old times.

The manager of the tea-shop, whom I recognised but who could not place me, came to Bhavnath and enquired after him. Bhavnath seemed to have been a fairly regular visitor to the canteen over the years and regretted that he could not come everyday. I asked Bhavnath about his work in the newspaper office and he pulled out a magnifying glass from his pocket and passed on to me a dictionary which he took out from his bag. The book was printed in very small types and I found it difficult to read it. Bhavnath held it against the magnifying glass and suddenly became engrossed in whatever he was looking at. It was only when I tapped him on the back that he informed me that his job in the newspaper office was that of a proof reader.

From the tea-shop we moved over to the college lawn where Bhavnath made himself comfortable sitting on the grass. I joined him, though I was finding it difficult to adjust myself to the surroundings. He enquired after me and I told him of my service career, of my wife and children and then looked at him. He gave me a very short reply—he lived all by himself, worked in the newspaper and wrote poetry whenever he felt like it. He showed me a copy-book of his poems. He had come a long way since Ascent-Descent. Though I did not think much of him as a poet, I congratulated him for continuing to write poetry. "Do you find time to read?" he asked me. "I glance through some poetry sometimes," I replied. He put the copy-book back in his bag and

said, "What a pity!" I knew that I was in for a lecture and that is exactly what happened.

Bhavnath drew up his legs to be a little more comfortable and started talking. "Glancing through is no reading," Bhavnath said, "to understand poetry, you must go into each and every word." To emphasise the point he took out the magnifying glass and shook it at me and repeated, "each and every word. Hamlet tells his mother, you are your husband's brother's wife. All very simple and ordinary words in themselves. But then in their peculiar juxtaposition the very same words became extraordinary and startling. These words tell his mother to look into her soul and make her realise her folly, her guilt and her heinous behaviour. To get at the meaning, one has to go even beyond the words."

Maybe this was true of Shakespeare, I reflected, but what is so great in the words of a poem like Ascent-Descent? Bhavnath had said, words are inflammatory and can set things ablaze. But I refused to believe that the words of his poems would become sparks to burn down the evils of society. When I got news that Bhavnath had gone to jail for his poetry, I knew that there had been some mix up somewhere. I learnt later that it was his very first poem, or rather half the poem, which had been the cause of his imprisonment. I was away at that time and whatever little I could know of the incident was this: when Bhavnath had written Ascent-Descent twelve years earlier, he could not have known that in the distant future, the elephant will be the symbol of a candidate contesting elections and that his opponent would quote Ascent to hint at the absurdity of the candidate's ambitions. In the controversy following the quotation, Bhavnath was dragged into the fray and the candidate with the elephant symbol thought that it would be of help to him if the poet gave a statement in his favour. But Bhavnath sent back all the emissaries of the candidate and finally wrote a letter to him asking him not to bother him any more. To his misfortune, the elephant won the elections and in the name of security Bhavnath was sent to jail.

By the time I met him again, I had been transferred back to my home town and Bhavnath had been released from jail. His release had been possible only because the elephant lost his election case and was unseated. When the elephant's opponents rejoicing over their victory, wanted to use the other half of the poem, Bhavnath refused them too. He got back the job which he had

lost when he had gone to jail. This had also made Bhavnath quite famous and the journals now were vying with each other to publish his poems.

When I rang him up, he asked me to meet him in the college canteen. I had by now gone a few rungs up in the social ladder and considered it *infra dig* to go there and so I invited him to my house. But Bhavnath suggested that I come to his house instead and I agreed. I parked my car on the curb of the main street and entered the narrow lane which was his address. I had to traverse quite a distance through labyrinthine alleys before I reached his house. He was waiting for me in his single room dwelling, which was littered with newspapers, magazines and books. He removed a stack of books from a corner of the bed to make place for me to sit down. I was curious to know about his jail term and when I asked him about it, he gave me the whole story without any bitterness or rancour. He even said that the time he spent in the jail was a blessing in disguise for him for, there, he could reflect on his life, which he thought would now enable him to write better poetry.

He went to the stove to make tea for me and I noticed that he was leading a self-contained life. I also noticed that he had become a serious person and exuded an intellectual calm. He was no longer the youngman who was the butt of jokes in college. Looking at him I could not think of Ascent-Descent as a funny poem. This transformed personality had even pervaded his past and coloured it differently.

As the water boiled on the stove, I asked Bhavnath, "Do you seriously believe that words could bring in a revolution?" Bhavnath kept quiet for a while to pour the tea into glass tumblers and said, "What do you understand of revolutions, you vermins of the establishment?" He was trying to insult me by hinting at my government job. I threw down the book I was holding in my hand and got up. Bhavnath put down the glass, held my hand and made me sit near him. He laughed a hearty laugh and said, "See how a few disconnected words enraged you." Though it took a while for me to calm down, Bhavnath had successfully and succinctly brought home to me his message. When he started talking to me about the power of words. I forgot all that he had said a minute earlier and listened to him with a renewed respect.

Words are weapons, Bhavnath explained to me, and one who used them successfully wielded power. Remember what Humpty Dumpty said? When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more, nor less. But how many authors can make such a claim? You love a girl and write her dozens of love letters professing love. But then the girl refuses to believe you. What does it show? It merely shows that you have not used the words right.

I asked him about the girl he was supposed to be in love with in college. Bhavnath suddenly became serious and said, "I will tell you all about her; but some other day. It is good that you reminded me of her. These days I hardly think of her. She is in all the poems I write, but she is not in my mind." As I left him that day, sullen and sad, I regretted having reminded him of her. I suspected that he would now forego his supper and spend a sleepless night thinking of his past.

I got a little more interested in him and bought a collection of his poems. When I met him in his house the next time, I asked him about the obscurity of his poems. "If you have a couple of hours," he said, "stay on and I will explain it all to you." I was going to sit down when he said, "No, we will go out today." He then locked the door and led me through dark labyrinthine lanes to a quiet place with a small pond and trees all around. Bhavnath switched on his flashlight to reveal a rusty bench on which we sat down. It became completely dark when he switched off the light. "Don't worry," he said, "the moon will come up in a little while."

Bhavnath became silent. It was a strange experience for me to leave behind the car, walk a mile and sit on the lonely embankment waiting for the moon to rise. I thought of Bhavnath's poetry and lines from his poems started nudging my mind. What had appeared to be a disjointed jumble of words now came back to me in a mosaic of profound meanings. I was now in a transcendental state where grass and tree, ant and elephant were all self-contained, complete and fulfilled.

It was Bhavnath who broke the spell of the silence. Instead of telling me about the meaning of his obscure poems, he told me about his love. "Do you remember the girl," Bhavnath asked me, "she was in the science class." I did not remember, but made a mental note of a face of the college days and juxtaposed that face with young Bhavnath's and listened to him. By this time

the moon had come up and the water in the pond had started glistening in the moonlight.

"We exchanged innumerable letters during our college days," Bhavnath continued his story, "and sometimes we wrote three to four letters a day. When she would go home during the holidays and I could not hear from her for a day or two I would feel suffocated and feel I was going to die. She left after the final exams and there was no letter from her for several days. I was thinking of going to her place when suddenly her letter came informing me that her marriage had been arranged. It was a great shock to me and I took to my bed. Sometimes I felt like going there and stopping the wedding. But then I thought that she perhaps wanted it that way since she merely mentioned the marriage and said nothing else. I kept quiet and she got married."

Bhavnath got her letter six months later. She had written that she was not going to live any longer and that he should take her away. Bhavnath did not know what to do. He wrote a cautious note, lest it fall into someone's hands. He received a reply soon enough, and they resumed their correspondence. Everytime she would write to him asking him to come and take her away, he would advise her to have patience. But she repeated her request to take her away in every letter.

Finally Bhavnath decided to go to her and wrote to her accordingly. She wrote back that she was very disturbed for her husband was ailing and his condition was critical. Bhavnath hoped that the man would die and this would solve all problems. He wrote to her as much and a few days later got a reply informing him that the husband had died of an overdose of medicines. She also asked him to meet her urgently as she had many important things to tell him.

Bhavnath neither replied to the letter nor made any effort to meet her. On the other hand he kept waiting for another letter from her. When no letter came after waiting for days, Bhavnath started off, wondering what sort of meeting he was going to have with the girl. He went to the strange city and found out her house, and asked a boy standing outside the house to go in and call her. The boy came back to tell him that she would not be able to come. He thought the boy did not understand right and so called the girl by her name. The girl did come. He had ex-

pected to see her in a widow's attire, dressed in white. But the girl was bedecked with ornaments and had a red sari on. As Bhavnath was going to step inside, the girl looked hard at him, said no, and shut the door on his face.

Bhavnath fell silent. The moon had by now come up and the spot shimmered in the moon-light. The surroundings and Bhavnath's story had woven a magic atmosphere and I was immersed in the fairy tale, which to me had no relationship with Bhavnath or the girl from our college.

Bhavnath suddenly said, "You were asking me about the obscurity of poetry. Well, let's take the story I just narrated and take away all the characters." At any other time, Bhavnath's words would have seemed illogical. But I found it possible to separate Bhavnath, the girl and her husband from the story.

Bhavnath said, "Right, let's now remove all the dialogues and emotions." I closed my eyes and removed these. What remained now? Some sadness, some pain, some understanding?

Bhavnath got up and said, "Let us go now." When we got up to leave the tiny lonely island of moonlight, he said, "Do you now understand what is poetry? Poetry is what remained over."

As I drove back I wondered if what Bhavnath had told me was true or was it a mere story to define poetry. I read Bhavnath's poems again that night and found a new meaning in them.

From then on, I would meet Bhavnath regularly so long as I was posted there. Bhavnath showed me all the new poems he wrote and I enjoyed reading them. Later, I got transferred, but we kept up our correspondence and Bhavnath continued to post me whatever poems he wrote. Once I did not hear from him for a long time and wrote him a letter worrying about his health. I received his reply after a few days together with his latest poem. It was a strange poem, in which the 'words' were a strange combination of alphabets nice sounding but conveying no meaning. Bhavnath had written, "You will be happy to learn that I have fallen in love again. I read somewhere," he had written, "that when we communicate with each other, only seven per cent of it is done through words, thirty-eight per cent through the voice and the remaining fifty-five per cent through facial expressions."

What sort of love was this, I wondered. Was it the same girl? Or was it another fairy tale? I did not hear from Bhavnath after this. He had also stopped publishing poems. Around this time

someone informed me that Bhavnath had become insane.

But I knew that Bhavnath still lived in his old house, hale and hearty and sound of mind. I also knew that when I met him next, he would be happily seated in his untidy room, but this time the dictionaries would be stacked away in a corner and he would be busy in a serious conversation with his tape recorder.

The Window

Whenever she thought of marriage, Savitri drew a mental picture of her prospective husband. Her parents had withdrawn her from school and she had now all the time on her hands to give finishing touches to the picture. She fixed the eyes, nose, ears and other limbs of her favourite film stars on the imaginery figure and conjured a definite picture of her beau. The young-man was fair and handsome, but Savitri did not allow him to be taller than five feet eight, since she herself was rather short. He was a habitual smoker and Savitri had a sneaking suspicion that he also took a drink once a while. Savitri was against his drinking, but encouraged him to smoke, for she considered cigarette-smoking men rather romantic. Savitri also imagined that when her eyes were turned, he took undue interest in her friends, and in those moments, Savitri would say to herself, let the marriage be over first and then I will deal with Mr. Romeo.

Savitri kept herself aloof from all discussions and arrangements for the wedding. Though they had not been able to find a boy so far, her mother busied herself putting together various things incidental to the wedding. Savitri's saris and ornaments were neatly arranged in a new suitcase, and when there was no money to fill up the suitcase with more saris and ornaments, Savitri's mother started buying many useful but cheap articles like soap and hair oil and pillow covers. Savitri's father spent all his spare time after office hours in trying to arrange her marriage. However, he was not very resourceful in this matter and all his efforts were confined to keeping worried all the time.

However, the kith and kin had accepted the search for a boy for Savitri as a challenge, and often came to her father with absurd and ridiculous proposals. In a short while, they gathered a lot of information about doctors in the USA, immigrant engineers, lecturers in remote villages, and touring railway officials, but Savitri's match was yet to be found.

This period of waiting was for Savitri a very pleasant, though a somewhat anxiety-ridden time. She did not have the burden of her studies and the whole family doted on her. In the circumstances, she allowed herself to drift into a dream world of her own. She was least interested in the discussions about the prospective groom's family conditions and hated words like ear-rings, bracelets, taurus and virgo, scooter and horoscope, which seemed to have become sudden favourites in the family lingo. On the other hand, she devoted herself to a closer study of the man of her dreams, who had become quite familiar to her by now. She indulged in romantic conversations with him, but shunned from thoughts of further intimacy before their marriage.

After many proposals had been examined and rejected everybody gave up hopes of Savitri's marriage taking place that year. At this juncture, the father of one of the boys relaxed the severe standards he had set about the matching of horoscopes, the height of the girl and the quantum of dowry, and the marriage was suddenly fixed. The discussions switched over to arrangements for the wedding, and the new words which took over were rather prosaic ones like invitation card, tent house, loud speaker and shamiana. Savitri took no interest in these too and refused to come out of her dream world. Even in the din and bustle of the wedding, sitting beside the stranger during the rituals, Savitri did not allow the handsome man of her dreams to desert her.

Savitri's introduction to her husband was a sad disappointment for her. Srinivas's looks, height, complexion and personality were unlike those of her ideal man and their first conversation was rather prosaic and devoid of any romance. Her first experience of intimacy, after their brief introduction, was also distasteful and full of disappointment for Savitri. She soon discovered that Srinivas was a religious type and far from smoking or drinking, did not touch meat or fish and was a strict vege-

tarian. Savitri also discovered gradually that Srinivas was rather shy with women and was not free even with her.

Srinivas worked in the railways and was the station-master of a small wayside station. When she went to live with Srinivas's parents for a few days, Savitri spent all her time thinking about the station. The thought of the new place with its speeding trains and crowded stations reminded her of sequences in favourite films, passages from novels and childhood journeys and brought her thrills of anticipation. She had premonitions of a disappointment, but eagerly held on to her dreams.

Savitri was immensely happy when they boarded the train to go to Srinivas's place of work. She was feeling quite suffocated in Srinivas's house and was looking forward to living a life of their own. This journey was for her an escape from her childhood, her memories and her dreams into an unknown world. She wanted a place where she could again immerse herself in her own thoughts away from questioning glances of friends and relatives. When they got down in the dark sleepy station late at night, Savitri felt rather happy. She also liked Srinivas's small railway quarter, not far from the station itself.

Next morning by the time Savitri woke up to the whistle of a train, Srinivas had already left for the station. Savitri went round surveying the rooms, and in the store room discovered in a corner pictures of gods and goddesses and incense sticks burning. Srinivas seemed to be an orderly person and everything was neatly arranged in the house. Savitri came back to the bedroom and looked out from the open window which gave out on a wide expanse of land with the railway lines running across it. Savitri opened the door and came out. Theirs was a lonely house and other houses were at a distance. She looked up at the skies and her eyes came back to rest on the barren landscape again with the train line. Her escape from her old life was now complete, she thought to herself.

Savitri had no interest in the friendly neighbours who visited her, and devoted herself to managing the household instead. A man from the station used to come and do the household chores and Savitri did not have much to do. In the small station, trains stopped at odd hours and so Srinivas's timings were peculiar. Savitri would be sound asleep when Srinivas got up in the morning and left for the station after his puja. He returned

home in between trains and finally came back late in the night after the last train. He was very quiet and mild-mannered and was always solicitous about Savitri's comforts. She had no complaints on this score.

During the first few days after her arrival, Savitri wrote many letters to her parents, brothers and friends. She got replies soon enough, but Savitri discovered that she had now no interest in the trivial news that they gave in their letters. Her friends wanted intimate details of her personal life, which she was in no mood to write about. She therefore wrote and answered fewer letters and the letters she received from her parents were now limited to enquiries about her health and well-being.

Srinivas spoke very little and during the time he was home, he spoke to Savitri only about household matters. Even during the intimate moments of the night, there was hardly any conversation between them. Most of her experiences of intimacy were frustrating, and though Savitri knew that they could improve matters by discussing it, she preferred to keep quiet since there was no initiative from Srinivas. Savitri soon lost interest in her sex life and started restraining Srinivas. Srinivas, who was always concerned about Savitri's smallest wishes, withdrew himself and stopped bothering her. There was thus no physical intimacy between them now.

Savitri was not very religious, but started spending some time before the pictures of the gods and goddesses. She read the newspapers which Srinivas brought line by line, and started reading the religious books kept near the pictures. She regulated her daily life into a routine like Srinivas, and every time a train went past, she came to the window and watched it till it went out of sight. When one train left, she thought of the next train and was familiar with the timings of all the trains. The trains slowed down in front of their house before reaching the station and Savitri enjoyed looking at the trains carrying passengers. She waited eagerly for the passenger trains and dressed herself carefully when the evening passenger train passed that way.

When the rains came, the trains seemed to get more mysterious. It rained heavily on their lone house and rivulets of water flowed all around, and passenger trains chugged past mysteriously through a curtain of rain. The figures all became indistinct, but

that added a new mystery to her imagination.

Though Srinivas was himself a vegetarian, he did not mind Savitri taking anything she liked. One rainy evening, the servant brought her fish from the market and Savitri found a small live fish in it. She picked it up carefully and put it in the rainwater outside. She returned the rest of the fish and became a vegetarian from that day.

After a year of her marriage, Savitri went to her parents' house for a few days. Though everyone in the house smothered her with love and affection, Savitri could not adjust herself to the old surroundings. Moreover, she knew that this respite was but a very short one for her and she would have to go back to her own world. She therefore cut short her stay and came back to Srinivas.

It was soon winter and the passenger train started arriving early in the afternoon. Srinivas came late in the night and Savitri found time weighing on her hands. She asked Srinivas to get her college books, so that she could study privately. Dutifully Srinivas got the books and Savitri read them with great interest. However, she would still wait for the passenger train, and leave her books to come to the window when the train came. After the train passed she went back to her books, but found it difficult to put her mind back to studies.

Though she was in good health, she started feeling weak and tired right from the time she got up in the morning. She did not feel like doing anything and even gave up dressing herself for the passenger train. Srinivas noticed the change and one day asked her if he should ask for a transfer to some other place. Savitri told him that everything was all right, and that she did not mind the place at all.

She spent most of her time listening to the radio as she lay on her bed. Her mind was however mostly in its own thoughts though the radio played on. Sometimes she came out of her reverie when some old favourite song of hers played, but soon the noise of the passing train drowned that too. One day, she sat up to listen to a song which had bothered her on her wedding day by blaring repeatedly on the loudspeaker. Midway through the song the passenger train came and Savitri rushed to the window. When she came back from the window after the train had passed, there was a new song on the radio. She pushed

away the text books and changed into a plain sari. When Srinivas came home that night, Savitri told him that she did not feel like preparing for exams and that she would much rather read novels.

Soon after, a boy arrived one evening with two bags full of books. Savitri had just seen the train pass and was having her cup of tea. She was in a pensive mood and took a book from the boy and asked him to come after two days to take back the book. She kept on looking out of the window and it is only when darkness fell that she switched on the light and looked at the book. It was a cheap romance, but Savitri soon found herself immersed in the story. She finished the book the same evening lying on the bed, and the story left in her a melancholy which she could not shake off easily.

Two days later, Savitri was looking at the passenger train, when she found the boy getting down from the slowly moving train in front of her house. When the boy came to her, Savitri chided him for getting off the running train and gave him a cup of tea. This time she looked at him closely as she selected books from his bag. She found out from him that he was sixteen, studied in the school in the morning and sold books in the station in the afternoons. Savitri exchanged the old book for another, with a kissing couple on its cover. Savitri asked the boy to come next day to take back the book, and when the boy said yes Madam, Savitri told him, call me *didi*.

That day the boy arrived very early. It was a holiday and he had taken an earlier train. Savitri was not yet dressed and was busy doing her hair. When she finished, she looked at the boy who had been sitting there looking at her admiringly, and told him, "Come on, I will comb your hair." The boy sat obediently before him and as she dressed his hair, Savitri asked him, "Do you also read these books?" The boy blushed and kept quiet and Savitri said with mock anger, "You are too young to read such naughty books. You should read your school books. You bring your books tomorrow and I will teach you."

The boy arrived with his text books next day, and Savitri spent some time helping him with his studies. The boy was now free with her, and from that day she waited for him and liked to spend time talking to him. On many days, she would not take any books from him. She had lost interest in the stereotyped

stories with the predictable turn of events. She sometimes rebuked the boy, "Why do you always bring such silly books? Aren't there any good books?" Or else she would pick up a book and ask him, "Have you read this one? Why did the man leave his wife and take the other woman?" The boy would lower his face in embarrassment and Savitri would take his face in her hands, fondle him and say, "You are my young brother."

One day Savitri told the boy, "Let us go to the other side of the railway track and have a look." As she was coming out, she stopped and said, "Let me change the sari." It was after a long time that she was taking out her coloured saris As she chose a bright coloured sari, she told the boy, "Look at the other side; I am going to change." She changed into the bright sari and walked to the railway line with the boy. She stood on the track and looked to the other side. There were a few houses and there was a wide expanse of open ground. She glanced at where the land met the sky and then her eyes came back to the railway line. She heaved a sigh and said, "We must go back now." At home, Savitri asked the boy to stay on as she changed into her white sari and made the boy a cup of tea before he left.

The boy came everyday and even though he spoke very little, Savitri talked a lot when he was there and was happy those few hours. One day when the boy said he was not well, Savitri forced him to lie down on the bed, pressed his forehead and gave him a tablet with his tea. Another day, she asked the boy to stand straight, looked him up and down and said, "You have become a big boy now. Let's measure your height." She stood him against the wall and noted his height with a pencil mark and put that day's date and said, "We will check up this day next year." One day the boy did not turn up and when he came the next day, Savitri went through his books and rebuked him harshly for not having brought the book she wanted. The boy was taken by surprise and was on the verge of tears when Savitri held him in her arms and herself cried a little and said, "I have none but you in this world."

Savitri became very irritable and spent most of her time lying on the bed. She went through the routine of her puja and her household chores as if in a trance. She would, however, cheer up a little before the evening train as she waited for the boy. That day Srinivas asked her whether he should seek a change,

but Savitri again said no. Next day, Srinivas was to go to the next junction on work for the day and asked Savitri if she would have any difficulty and Savitri said no. When the boy came that evening, Savitri whispered to him, "You must come early tomorrow morning and have your meal with me. He would be away and we will go to some faraway place."

Srinivas left next morning to return only in the night. Savitri took an early bath, dressed up and waited for the first train. Savitri waited long after the train left, but the boy did not come. Savitri did her cooking and waited for the next train. She waited the whole day, but the boy did not come even by the late evening train. Savitri changed into her white sari and lay down on the bed. She had not eaten anything the whole day but did not take her supper either. When Srinivas returned late at night, Savitri opened the door for him but went back to the bed again without saying anything.

The boy did not come the next day either. On the third day, Savitri knew that he won't ever come again. She was not feeling well and did not get up from the bed in the morning. Srinivas asked her if he should get her some medicines, but she said, no. As Srinivas opened the door to go to the station, Savitri only said, "Please close the window before you go."

The Nightmare

Till such time as he had not been reminded of the dream of the previous night, it was for Avinash a morning like any other. He recalled the dream while he looked at himself in the mirror in the bathroom. In the dream, God was ten feet tall, He was dressed in black and His face was indistinct. God stood before him for a moment and said, "Your time is up; come to me."

The dream had taken a different turn at this point and Avinash did not remember all that followed. However, his brief encounter with God was fresh in Avinash's mind. He broke in a cold sweat as the dream came to his mind. He remembered without any effort the mantra which some guru had taught him, but which he had not practised for several years now. He hurriedly chanted the whole mantra.

The dream was beyond the imagination of Avinash. Were he to visualise death, he would have imagined a fierce looking Yama, snare in hand, sitting on a black buffalow. His idea of death was confined to stories of Satyavan and Nachiketa and he had many a time fancied himself in the role of Nachiketa, pestering the Lord of Death with innumerable questions But in his dream, it was God Himself who had brought him the news of his death. Had he had any control over his dreams, he would have dressed up God in white and would have given Him a handsome face resembling the face of the famous filmstar who often played Krishna on the screen. He would also have liked to make His language solemn and free of slang.

But then all such thoughts were now meaningless and may be

a little heretical too. Avinash was somewhat scared and did not want to do something which would enrage God and make Him take him away immediately. Avinash remembered the sunday supplement which carried a piece on the interpretation of dreams. He found the paper and hurriedly went through the article "The night is divided into four parts," the article said, "for the purposes of dreams. The dreams of the first quarter of the night fructify in a year; those of the second quarter in six months; those of the third quarter in three months and those in the last quarter of the night materialise within a month."

Avinash did not remember exactly when the dream had come and cursed himself for not looking at the watch immediately after the dream. The dream did not occur in the first quarter for certain, for Avinash was very late going to bed the previous night. More likely as not, the dream had come early in the morning, for Avinash remembered it vividly. This meant he had only a month to go. Avinash analysed it further. If the dream had occurred in the very last hour of the night, it would mean that he had a respite of only a few days. Whether it was a year or a few days, death was imminent and this thought made Avinash's blood run cold.

Avinash debated in his mind whether to share the dream with his wife, but thought better of it. Some time in the past Avinash had done the foolishness of telling his wife about a dream in which he was seated on a throne dressed in crown and princely robes, and had assured his wife that none could now stop his increment and promotion in his office. Unfortunately he did not get his promotion and his wife often made fun of him by reminding him of his dream. Though the present dream was a sad one, Avinash knew that his wife was not beyond the thought, better be a widow than suffer the foolishness of the husband. Avinash therefore decided not to take his wife into confidence. He also decided not to tell this to Arvind Babu who sat next to him in the office and often shared his own personal family problems with him.

There was no question of going to the office after such a dream. So he made plans for taking leave feigning illness, and was indignant that he had to involve his wife in the plan. However, this could not be helped and so he made groaning noises as if he was in real pain. Unfortunately his wife was in the kitchen

and could not hear him and all his efforts went in vain.

Avinash remembered the stars foretell column in the newspaper and wanted to find out if the predictions against his zodiac sign confirmed the prescience of his dream. He located the column, but was faced with a new problem. Though he knew himself to be a Gemini, the dates of birth against the various signs showed him to be a Taurus. As per the predictions, it was a good week for the Geminians with promotions and financial gains and though the Taurans were not as lucky, the week held out for them prospects of female company and romance. At any other time, these predictions would have amused and cheered him, but in the present state they only seemed to be mocking at him. He threw away the newspaper in disgust and sat down to reflect on his fate.

The more he thought, the more he was convinced about his imminent death. He calculated that he was forty-nine, and remembered his colleague who had retired the previous year. Though sixty-five, he was quite hale and hearty and seemed to have cheated not only the Government but even God Himself with his false birth certificate. He came to the office once in a while and was quite popular with the younger people whom he regaled with dirty stories. Avinash thought it to be a grave injustice that he should be given the notice when this gentleman was alive and kicking. However, he desisted from the thought of making an appeal to God on this score, lest it be treated irreverent.

Avinash looked for a pen and paper to list out things to do before the final day. He never needed to write anything in his house and did not know where he could find some paper and a pen. He shouted at his wife, but before she could reply, he found the pen and paper and sat down to make the calculations. He wrote down the date of his birth and worked out that he was forty-nine years three months and seven days old. Below this he wrote down the names and age of his two sons and tried to estimate the cost of their education. He did not find the task easy, for the elder son who was in college was wayward and poor in studies. However he mentioned two figures against their names and increased the figure against the wayward boy by fifty per cent.

Had his wife come and talked to him, he would at least have

told her of his plans for the children, if not about the dream. But his wife simply put the breakfast tray on the table and when Avinash said he was not hungry, took away the plate and started eating the breakfast herself. This angered Avinash and he suddenly felt hungry too, but kept quiet.

When he looked at the calculations again, he remembered about the insurance policy and the fact that a year's premiums were overdue. If the dream had come a couple of years earlier, he would certainly have taken a policy for a higher amount, but then he wondered where he would have got the money to pay the higher premiums He started looking for the insurance papers but could not find them amidst the litter of old prescriptions, cash memos and carbon copies of applications. "Where is my insurance policy?" he shouted out. His wife, who was slicing vegetables in the kitchen came out with a big piece of gourd in her hand and shouted back, "How do I know? Do I ever touch your papers?"

This hurt Avinash and he muttered under his breath, go to hell, and decided that he would not pay the overdue policy. Now he tore off the sheet of paper on which he had made the calculations and sat down to take stock of his life. He was a good student in college and had a flair for literature. He even wrote poetry. He had kept with him the forty-three poems he had written and had always been planning to write seven more, but had not succeeded. He had finally given the poems to his boss to disprove the entry in his character roll that his notings were of poor quality. He had not succeeded in having the entry deleted, and had missed his promotion that year. He had also not been able to ask his boss to return the poems. The poems were now lost so far as he was concerned.

While in college, he had undertaken another monumental plan. This was to write, during his life time, five existentialist novels based on his own life. Though he was young then, he had charted out his entire life and had even decided the titles of the five volumes: Wonder, Wisdom, Love, Bliss and Oblivion. He had jotted down the outline of the five novels in a bound red copybook. Avinash now wanted to complete the project before his death. He started looking for the copy-book, but could not find it even after combing through the whole cupboard. He shouted, "Where is my red copy-book?" but then he remembered, but

before he could say, "I have got it," his wife appeared. This time she had half a brinjal in one hand and the heavy vegetable slicer in the other.

Avinash got into the bathroom in a hurry and remembered about the red copy-book. In some weak moment he had mentioned to his wife his literary ambitions. One evening when he asked for supper, his wife said, "It will take another hour; why don't you go sit down and start writing your five stories or whatever?" Avinash could have laughed it off as his wife's utter naivete about existentialism, but at that hungry moment, it had irritated him and he had torn off the outline and had given the blank copy-book to his son. He had grave doubts now if he would be able to write without the help of the outline. He even started having doubts about the sequence of the five titles and whether the last volume was to be titled Oblivion or Wisdom.

Inside the bathroom he looked at his own body. It had gone to seed and was not going to last long, he thought. He had grown fat and bald and had six false teeth. The other day his son had refused to believe the photograph of a younger Avinash to be his father's. Avinash often felt weak and exhausted and wondered if he had got ulcers and blood pressure. However, he was scared of visiting his doctor.

His failing health had made him mentally weak too. In his office, he was known to be the most timid and broke in a sweat whenever the boss sent for him and stammered in his presence. He did not know how to strike a bargain and was uncomfortable in a crowd. He suffered in silence uncalled for abuses, for he did not have the nerve to speak back. Contemplating on these now, he started having grave doubts about his right to live.

Though he had made up his mind not to go to the office, he did not want to stay in his house either. So after his bath he got dressed and came out. His wife did not bother to talk to him even though he had not had his breakfast in the morning. The first thing he looked for once on the road was a telephone to ring up his office and ask for leave. He had thought that the sad news of his dream would have by now reached his office by some strange means and cast a shadow of gloom there. But when he finally got Arvind Babu on the telephone and told him of his illness, he laughed aloud instead of showing some sympathy and

said, "There was a very funny incident in the office today." Avinash put down the telephone in disgust and stepped onto the road, when the shopkeeper shouted and Avinash realised that he had forgotten to pay for the call.

The sun was getting brighter and Avinash found his hunger more painful than the memory of the nightmare. He entered a restaurant and ordered some snacks. There was no other customer and the delay in service only sharpened his hunger. He looked at the street where life went on as usual, and the people looked busy and happy, oblivious of Avinash's misery. The world appeared to him a ruthless callous place having no sympathy for the suffering of others. Even the waiter put the plate on the table with an unnecessary bang and went away before he could ask for another glass of water. It is better to die, thought Avinash.

Avinash started analysing the dream in the cold light of the day. He was feeling a little better after breakfast and was much less scared now walking the crowded streets. He asked himself why he had taken the black-robed figure to be God. So far as he remembered the apparition did not say I am God. But then everything did not happen naturally in dreams and one had to rationalise and figure out. What else could the black form be, he asked himself but could find no answers.

He had now stopped worrying about his imminent death and his main worry now was how to spend the whole day without any work. He was no longer thinking of his wayward son, the lapsed insurance policy or the outline of his magnum opus. He was thinking instead of an umbrella to protect him from the sun. His mind was a little lighter now as he strolled aimlessly. He stood near shop-windows and noted the prices of various articles, which he was never going to buy. He examined toys in a pavement shop and drank a glass of fruit juice though he was not thirsty.

Avinash looked at his watch and found that it was only twelve. He wondered what else he could do the whole afternoon. He wanted to return home, but recalled his irascible wife with slicer in hand and desisted from the thought. All of a sudden he saw a sight which made his blood run cold. God was striding ahead through the crowd. He had His black robe on and if not ten feet tall, He was the tallest person in the crowd. Avinash

knew that there was no escape and that his time was really up. All at once his mind got busy with thoughts of his family's future, his insurance policy and the nascent novel.

It was surely God's way of reminding him of the warning he had dared ignore. He was now giving him a direct message: if he disbelieved seeing Him in his dream, let him now see Him in flesh and blood in broad daylight and realise the gravity of the situation. It was as if He was going call out, I will take you this very minute. Avinash muttered an apology for his impertinence and chanted the mantra again.

When God vanished round the corner, Avinash woke up from his reverie. He got hold of himself and started walking fast in search of God. He was disappointed not to find Him when he reached the corner and broke into a run. But God had vanished into thin air and when he asked people about a tall man in a black robe, no one could help. Only one man asked back if the person had a beard, but Avinash could not give an answer.

He had covered quite a distance running from street to street. He was tired and felt relieved to see a small park with a few trees. He went inside and sat on the cement bench under the tree. Many emotions—fear, tiredness, boredom, repentance—flashed through his mind. After resting a while, he got up and started for the street. At this moment his eyes fell on the man in a black overall sleeping under the tree on the other side. He could not judge the man's height, but the man was rather short. He had a bundle under his head and his monkey was tied to the trunk of the tree. The man was sound asleep and the monkey was busy doing acrobatics by himself.

Avinash looked at the sleeping man without any interest as he came out of the park and took a bus to his office. The lunch break was over and his colleagues were all in their seats. When he sat down, Arvind Babu looked up from his file and Avinash said, "I felt better and so came." Arvind Babu seemed to be worried about something and went back to his file without saying anything. Avinash remembered his personal case and so he took out a sheet of paper and started writing an application.

He suddenly discovered that he had written "Dear God" on the paper. Angry with himself, he rolled the paper into a ball and threw it away. Now he took another sheet of paper and on it wrote with a steady hand, "Respected Sir, etc."

The Responsibility

Parshuram noted with some surprise that the moment they got down from the bus in the Capital, old man Dharmdas became a different person. Dharmdas was the universal Grandpa in the village and commanded respect from young and old alike. Any outsider coming to their village had first to meet Dharmdas. He was called for whenever there was a problem and they would all abide by his decision. Though not well read, Dharmdas was a wise man; he knew what was just and right and was selfless. What was more, no one had ever heard him telling a lie.

Dharmdas who would walk with his head held high in the village suddenly seemed to shrivel and shrink. He was a stranger to the ways of city life, which he found cold and hostile. He was suffocated by the affluent but impersonal atmosphere and was only thinking of getting back to the village. In his misery he found consolation in the fact that Parshuram was with him.

Parshuram had been in the army for a while and had seen the world. He was the most excitable young man in the village and was to be seen in every scuffle and brawl. Whenever he heard a noise anywhere in the village, he would come out dressed in his khaki uniform with a lathi in his hand and get headlong into the crowd. Without bothering to find out what is what and who is to blame, he would raise his lathi and shout: "I will break the bastard's head." His very violent presence and threat often settled many a fight.

Parshuram regretted that he had not put on his khaki uniform. In the village, khaki made him look vaguely like a police, forest

or excise official and evoked some respect from the simple village folk. Though this dress would have meant nothing in the city, Parshuram felt uncomfortable without it.

They had hardly stepped onto the road when a car drove past barely missing them. Scared, Dharmdas stepped back and a passerby said with a sneer, "You'll get killed old man, watch out." No one in the village would dare address Dharmdas with such disrespect and Parshuram wondered if he should not break the man's head. Dharmdas now held Parshuram's hand firmly and they got on to the road again looking for the Minister's bungalow.

Dharmdas would not have agreed to come to the Capital had he known of the crowds, the traffic and of the various other hazards. But the villagers had immense faith in him and trusted him to solve the problem of the irrigation project. The reservoir of the project had been completed three years earlier, but the villagers could not get any water as canals had not been dug. Their enquiries had revealed that the proposals for digging the canal had gone 'higher up', and on further probe from one office to another had been told that the matter was now at the highest level, namely the Government.

It would have been an impossible task for them to fathom who or what the Government was, but fortunately general elections were announced at that time and people from high up started descending on the village. The two candidates were strangers to the villagers and when they came to the village, they named them Club-foot and Wall-eye. Club-foot who was the candidate of the ruling party was the first to arrive and the villagers took him to Dharmdas. Club-foot spoke to them about democratic rights, self-rule, mixed economy and non-alignment. Dharmdas listened to him patiently and when he had finished, asked him about the canal. Club-foot appeared disappointed at the pettymindedness of the villagers and gave them a lecture on inflation, individual freedom and nationalisation. After this speech, when Dharmdas again asked him about the canal, Club-foot went away in a huff.

Wall-eye appeared a few days later. He was clever and his spies had given him advance information about his opponent's visit. He got the villagers together and the first thing he asked them was about the canal. He told the villagers that the Govern-

ment was to blame for not digging the canal, a fact the villagers were only too well aware of. Wall-eye criticised the Government on this score and told them about misuse of power, autocratic Government and nepotism. But on enquiry he could not tell the villagers when the digging of the canal would start.

As the election drew closer, Club-foot came to the village again. He was now a little worried about his prospects and did not want to lose the seventy odd votes. He asked Dharmdas about the canal before getting into his speech on democratic rights, and promised that the canal would be dug within fifteen days of his winning the election. Besides the canal, he also promised them two wells for drinking water. Club-foot next went to other villages where he gave the villagers firm promises of wells, tanks, schools, colleges, market places, roads and irrigation projects within fifteen days of the election. The people believed him as he was from the ruling party and needless to say, it was Club-foot who won the election.

Everything became quiet after the election. The reservoir started drying up during the summer, and filled up during the rains, and it was a second summer now after the election, but there was no canal yet. Club-foot had meanwhile been a deputy-minister and had elevated himself to a minister of state taking advantage of dissensions in the party. The villagers again went from office to office enquiring about the canal to be told that the proposal had gone to the Government. They were also told that Club-foot was now Government. Some of them were relieved to hear about it, but Parshuram said, "I'll break the bastard's head." The villagers finally decided that Dharmdas and Parshuram would go to the Capital to meet Club-foot and somehow get the canal done.

Meeting Club-foot was not, however, an easy task as they soon discovered. His bungalow was a fortress which was daily being besieged by hundreds of people who came with numerous grievances. Around the house were several strategic battle arrays, arranged in concentric circles, reaching up to the road. It was a formidable and time-taking task crossing the various obstacles to reach the minister's office, and some had to spend months in the process. There were of course many war-worn businessmen, industrialists and contractors who knew secret passages through the battlements and could reach the minister directly. Club-foot

had perforce to devote much of his time to removing the grievances of these veterans.

It was quite early in the day when they found their way to the bungalow, but there was already a crowd there. Some of the people who had been waiting for days had spread their bed rolls and were relaxing while others were having tea in the makeshift stalls set up for the benefit of the visitors. Dharmdas was quite tired after a night's bus journey and was keen to get back to the village as early as possible after meeting Club-foot. At the outermost line of defence, they were met by a well dressed gentleman, who chose a spot six inches from their feet and squirted betel juice from his mouth there. He was the guardian of the first line of defence and asked them how much money they had. Dharmdas was going to show him the money they had left with them for the return fare, when a car stopped and the gentleman suddenly lost all interest in them and made a bee line for the car.

The guardian of the second obstacle, a uniformed policeman with gun in hand, was at that time lighting his cigarette from the lighted bidi of a bare-bodied man clad only in a lungi. Being unaware of the rules of warfare, Dharmdas entered the open gate straightaway only to be chased by the policeman who had in his hurry thrown down the gun. "Hey old fool," the policeman shouted at him, "where the hell do you think you are going?" He was going to strike Dharmdas, but Parshuram stopped him. Parshuram would have liked to lay on the policeman, but Dharmdas calmed him and the policeman chased them back to the road.

The pan-chewing gentleman who had no other car borne clients with him now, came to them and having sat down on the ground asked them to sit down too. Parshuram sat down, but his mind was busy imagining interesting but highly impractical plans for breaking different parts of the policeman's body. When Dharmdas told the gentleman the purpose of their visit to the Capital, the gentleman advised, you have to prepare an application; nothing gets done in the Government unless it is put in pen and paper. Parshuram retorted, "When they had come for votes, they did not put in any applications to us." The gentleman was quite generous and took no notice of what Parsuram said, and advised them to go to the court compound where they could get an application written.

The courts were some distance away and Dharmdas was dog tired by the time they reached there. The first thing that the man sitting with a typewriter under a tree said on seeing them was, "Five rupees." Parshuram was now disgusted with the mercenary attitude of the city dwellers and said, "Let's go back, Grandpa, these bastards will do nothing." But Dharmdas said, "Having come spending all that money, let's get the work done even if we have to spend a few more rupees." Finally a bargain was struck at four rupees, and they returned to the fortress carrying with them a neatly typed letter enquiring about the digging of the canal.

The place had so changed by this time that Dharmdas wondered if they had come to the right bungalow. The whole place was deserted now, the tea stall was not there and the cigarette smoking sentry and the pan-chewing gentleman had vanished too. The gate was open and cows were grazing on the lawn. There was only a servant boy who informed them that the minister had gone to the Secretariat. They made enquiries and took the road to the Secretariat, but Parshuram knew that nothing was going to get done there too. He only hoped that there would soon be another election and when Club-foot came to their village again, he would break both his legs.

They found the Secretariat to be a different type of fortress with more civilised rules of siege. The sentry was not smoking and the receptionist was guiding the jet of betel juice into the spittoon. "What is your name, Sir?" the receptionist asked Dharmdas and wrote down the name in the register in a neat handwriting. He found out the purpose of their visit and gave them a chit of paper and said, "Your interview is fixed for the ninth of the next month."

There was no use talking to the receptionist, for he was now busy finding out from the next man the purpose of his visit and giving him a date. Dharmdas knew that they were beaten and it was not possible to meet Club-foot. He was feeling miserable now, but when he mentioned the return journey, Parshuram said, "Let's make a final attempt, Grandpa, there will still be time for the bus."

Parshuram took Dharmdas to a tea shop where they had tea and then they walked back to the Minister's bungalow. The place was again looking like an active battle field. The sentry,

the tea vendor and the helpful gentleman had all taken their positions. The sentry recognised them and mocked, "So you are back, you silly oafs." Parshuram did not take offence this time and without arguing with him said, "Bhai, please do us a favour and allow us to meet the minister." The sentry was not to be won over and without even bothering to look at them said, "Every bloody bastard wants to meet the minister; as if the minister is a servant at their beck and call."

Parshuram now went to the pan-chewing helpful gentleman. He asked them as to how much money they were carrying, but when he recognised them, asked them if they had got the application. Parshuram handed him the piece of paper and with folded hands said, "Please, Sir, take us to the Minister." The man looked at the paper and said, "Follow me." The sentry did not stop them this time and they joined a crowd of people who were already gathered on the front lawn. The man returned the application to them and went inside the house.

Club-foot came out after a little while. He had become fatter and his face shone with self confidence. He greeted the gathering with folded hands and straightaway embarked on a speech. "Brothers and sisters," he said, "I know that you have come to me with many grievances and demands. But this is not a time to be selfish. This is a time to think of the country. The country's borders are threatened by enemies. Inside the country there is crime, lawlessness and galloping inflation. Let us then think, my brothers and sisters, of the problems of the country. And remember, brothers and sisters, you are the ones responsible for the country's progress and security."

Having said so much, Club-foot went back as suddenly as he had come. Parshuram was wondering what they should do now when the benevolent gentleman came to them and said, "You are lucky; you could meet the Minister the same day." Parshuram showed him the piece of paper and the man said, "Give it to me, I will give it to the Minister and it will reach the proper quarters."

It was a night's bus journey back to the village. Parshuram avoided looking at Dharmdas who was looking not only tired but worried. In the early morning they got off the bus and as they were walking back to their village, Parshuram said, "I am going ahead Grandpa, I will join you in a minute."

Parshuram was quiet, but his head was in a turmoil. While he got into his khaki uniform, he made a list of the heads he was going to break, and he did not forget the sentry, the receptionist, the officers, the typist and the Minister. When Parshuram came out of the house lathi in hand and went to the village yard, Dharmdas was already seated surrounded by the villagers. They were asking him about the Minister. And for the first time, Parshuram heard Dharmdas telling a lie. He was telling the villagers, "The moment we entered the gate, the Minister came out to greet us and took us inside the house . . . ."

Communication

Chakrapani had hardly settled down with pen and paper when there was a knock on the door and telephone bells started ringing inside his head. He allowed the ring to keep going for a while, but when Shakuntala did not answer the knock, he had to get up. When he opened the front door, the boy standing outside handed him a sheet of paper without saying anything. Chakrapani read the first line, this boy has no tongue, and looked at the boy's face. The boy was accustomed to this reaction and opened his mouth to show that he did not indeed have a tongue. Without reading the paper further, Chakrapani knew that it was an appeal for financial help to the mute boy. He returned the paper to the boy, nodded his head from side to side and closed the door with a bang.

Shakuntala heard the noise this time and shouted from the kitchen, "Is that Bhola?" Chakrapani feigned not to have heard the question and returned to his papers. These papers were extracts of notings in the office file relating to his personal case, and these he had acquired over a period of time through various ingenious means. The problem was the correct fixation of his remuneration for a period following the pay revision six years earlier. As per his calculation, he had to get thirty five days' pay at a higher rate, but the accountant of his office calculated it differently to his disadvantage. Chakrapani considered this to be a deep-seated conspiracy by the accountant and had made it his life's goal to set right this injustice.

He went through the papers once again though he was fully

conversant with each noting. As a matter of fact, he was now more at home with service rules than with repairing faults of telephones, which was really his profession. Everyone in the office knew about his battle royal for enhanced remuneration for the thirty-five days and even assistants from the service rules section sometimes came to him for advice on their own salary problems. Though Chakrapani had succeeded in helping some of them get their dues, his own case had lingered on. His immediate concern was to present his case in a fresh application to the new boss who had just joined. Chakrapani was by now an old hand at reviving rejected applications through revised drafts and he was arranging the arguments in his mind for a new draft.

He had forgotten the sound of the banging door, but Shakuntala apparently had not, for she repeated her question, "Is that Bhola?" The phone rang in Chakrapani's head, but he decided not to lift the receiver and allowed it to go no reply. But he knew only too well that the telephone would ring again and so he said no, and this time he disconnected the line and concentrated on his problem.

The arrears for thirty-five days were no longer a matter of a few rupees for him; it was now for him a question of justice and prestige. He had meanwhile had three bosses but none of them cared to understand his problem. They did not want to get into the intricate nuances of the complicated service rules and chose to agree with the accountant. Chakrapani had immense faith in the new boss and wanted to tackle him before he succumbed to the influence of the accountant. The matter was now six years old and Chakrapani thought of the three bosses. They were unlike each other, but they all agreed on one thing. They refused to believe that the accountant was denying Chakrapani his hard earned dues on account of some personal animosity. Chakrapani too could not cite any instance of any personal feud with the accountant to convince the bosses.

But then Chakrapani was not one to tell a lie. He could have proved the accountant's hostility towards him by saying that the accountant had abused him when he had merely cast him a resentful glance. But he had full faith in the maxim that truth triumphed in the end. His only sorrow was that Shakuntala took no interest in this life and death battle of his. In spite of his

best efforts she had not understood even the first provision of the service rules. Chakrapani was, however, confident that he would one day make Shakuntala interested in these rules.

Fortunately Shakuntala came near him and Chakrapani very carefully took out his very first representation to show to her. But before he could say anything, Shakuntala said, "Your job is to repair faulty telephones, why should you always be raking through these papers? And all the time people are complaining about the poor telephone service." Chakrapani took the thread of this conversation and said, "Yes, telephone faults will get repaired but who will listen to the woes of the telephone mechanics? It is six years now . . ." Chakrapani lifted his head from the papers and looked at Shakuntala. She had her eyes no doubt on the papers, but her ears were tuned to the kitchen. Without allowing Chakrapani to say anything more, she shouted, "What did you break this time?" and ran towards the kitchen.

No, Shakuntala was beyond help. She had no interest in most things he did, and none to speak of in service rules. Chakrapani had once overheard on the telephone line the secret conversation of two top political leaders about the fall of the ministry. His first reaction had been that with a new ministry, there would be a shake up of officers and with some luck he would get a new boss who would not fall a prey to the wiles of the accountant. Shakuntala was an avid newspaper reader and Chakrapani had thought of startling her with this piece of scoop news. But Shakuntala was that day not in a good mood and when he gave the news to her, she said, "You are worried about the break up of the ministry, but what about the tumblers that the servant boy is breaking everyday? I cannot manage with him any longer."

Servant boys were Shakuntala's problem. None of the thirty-odd servants engaged during twenty years had met with her approval. Everytime a new servant boy was engaged, Shakuntala spent all her time and energy trying to make him an ideal servant, but she had not yet succeeded in her noble attempt. To her misfortune, the servants also came determined to break all her glass tumblers. Shakuntala knew this and carefully supervised the dish washing, but the servants somehow managed to frustrate her. Shakuntala therefore would always have her ear to the kitchen and the house reverberated now and then with her shout, "what did you break this time?"

Shakuntala's other problem was the servant boy's going out of the house time and again. The villain in this case was the back door of the house. Had she been given to plan the house, she would have cut out the back door and could have regulated the servant boy's exits by guarding the front door. The servant boy now went out of the house at the slightest opportunity and Shakuntala added 'who went out now' to her question 'what was broken'.

As Shakuntala viewed the service rules with disdain, so did Chakrapani consider the problem of tumblers getting broken or the servant boy going outside the house for a few minutes. To him, Shakuntala's trying to discover invisible dust specs on furniture was a bit overdone. But Shakuntala was equally convinced that if she did not watch out, the house would turn into a garbage heap. Chakrapani could have ignored all these, but unfortunately no servant would stay with them for more than six months or so and he had to look for a new servant boy. There were gaps when there would be no servant, and though the house ran as efficiently as ever, Shakuntala would have no peace of mind those few days.

After satisfying herself that the glass tumblers were safe, Shakuntala came back and Chakrapani tried to win her over by tackling the subject from another angle. "We have got a new boss now," he told her. This, however, had a different reaction on Shakuntala and she said, "It is easier to get a new boss than a new servant. Bhola did not cook in time and Pappu and Mini had to go to college without taking a full meal." Chakrapani realised that the matter had gone beyond his control. So he decided to go back to the papers after disconnecting all the telephone lines inside his head. But Shakuntala had the receiver firmly in her hand and asked, "Has Bhola given you tea?"

Shakuntala shouted for Bhola, but the servant boy did not respond for the simple reason that his name was not Bhola. The servant boy whose name was Bhola had left their service a year earlier. Shakuntala went to the kitchen and Chakrapani now replaced the receiver. This was, however, short-lived for within minutes she was back, with the servant boy marching ahead of her holding a cup of tea. She did not approve of the particular spot on the table where the boy kept the tea cup and so gave him a baleful stare and moved the cup an inch away. Before

Chakrapani could say anything, she said, "I cannot manage with this boy; you must find a new servant."

Chakrapani did not know the art of feigning inaudibility after listening to someone, though he had come across many such instances while eavesdropping on telephone conversations of others. For instance, he had received a complaint the other day of the disturbance in the line while a minister was talking to a police officer of a far off district. His check showed that the telephone line was perfectly all right, but the police officer was refusing to listen to the oral instruction of the minister to arrest an opposition leader. The police officer could hear the operator's voice all right, but the moment the minister came on the line, his auditory powers were getting impaired. However, Chakrapani did not have the courage to regulate his auditory powers when Shakuntala spoke to him. He therefore assured Shakuntala that he would put his heart and soul in locating a new servant boy.

He put down the receiver again and was about to go through the papers when there was a second knock on the door and the telephone inside his head started ringing. Chakrapani opened the door expecting to see the same old boy again, but it was only Mini returning from the college and he closed the door to Shakuntala's question, "Is that Bhola?" Mini was talkative and wanted to give everyone a running commentary of all that happened in the college during the day. Chakrapani had enjoyed the story of the absent-minded professor falling off the chair, but since such events did not happen everyday, Chakrapani could not take interest in Mini's running commentaries. Mini was thus left to tell her stories to the servant boy. The boy did not understand a thing, but it was a source of satisfaction to Mini as it was a cause of much irritation to Shakuntala.

In this matter, Pappu was Mini's exact opposite. Though he would talk with his friends for long hours, he became tongue-tied the moment he entered the house. Pappu spent all his time in the house in his studies and spoke to no one. He got indignant when Mini spoke of events in her college and they all left him alone to his studies.

When she saw Mini, Shakuntala remembered that the servant boy had not prepared the meals in time and she called the boy and subjected him to a second round of scolding. Though Mini affirmed that she had indeed had her full lunch, Shakuntala

treated this as an unnecessary indulgence towards servants. May be Mini had her lunch, but Shakuntala had no doubts that Pappu had gone to the college hungry. "Where is Pappu?" Shakuntala asked keeping in mind the possibility of subjecting the boy to a further scolding on this score. Mini had just come back from the college canteen and was not hungry and was unhappy that she was not able to share the interesting events of the day with someone. "Whoever knows where Pappu goes," Mini said, "Does he tell anyone where he goes? He was saying he was learning Chinese or Japanese language, maybe he has gone to the evening class. And our English professor . . . ."

Having said all this, Mini suddenly stopped. Her English professor was looking funny that day having had two of his front teeth removed, but Mini knew that no one was interested in hearing about it, and so she went to her study. Chakrapani heaved a sigh of relief, for he did not have to listen to Mini's frivolous stories. Shakuntala had already gone rushing to the kitchen to frustrate the servant boy's efforts at breaking the tumblers. Chakrapani now disconnected all the telephone lines and concentrated on his papers.

Chakrapani wanted a direct line to his boss without cross connection with the accountant's number and his main worry now was to get this line of communication. He shuffled through the papers and pondered for a while. He had to draft the new application in a language which would be intelligible to the boss without the accountant's comments. He thought of a suitable draft and was convinced that he had now got a disturbance-free hot line to his boss.

He had started to put it on paper when there was another knock. There was a feeble ring in his head and Chakrapani put the phone on the engaged tone. The man on the other side of the door repeated his knock and connected his number again. This time Chakrapani resorted to a no reply strategy. But when the phone started ringing a third time, Chakrapani went to the door, determined to silence the fellow for ever by cutting of his tongue.

When he went to open the door, Mini was already there. Shakuntala had also come over to ensure that Bhola did not run away through the open door. Chakrapani noted that the boy standing outside was not dumb, for he asked for Pappu. Before

Chakrapani could say anything the boy handed him a piece of paper and vanished. Chakrapani could not understand whether the paper was meant for Pappu or whether Pappu had sent it. Shakuntala said, "Such a nice servant boy, you should have found out more about him." This reminded Shakuntala about Pappu's incomplete lunch in the morning and she asked what Pappu had written.

Chakrapani became speechless when he opened the piece of paper. The note was in Chinese or Japanese and was unintelligible to Chakrapani. He was about to say something to Shakuntala but thought better of it and kept quiet. The hot line to his boss was severed now. He allowed the telephone bells to ring inside his head. A thousand telephones started ringing and engaged and no reply tones got mixed with many through calls to bring him myriad messages. Unconcerned, Chakrapani resigned himself to the many voices and sounds which included knocks on the door, Mini's laughter, Pappu's silence, Chinese and Japanese phrases, breaking of tumblers and 'is that Bhola'.

The Appointed Place

Hariram looked around the room and finally selected a chair at the farthest corner and sat down. There were several others like him in the room waiting for the interview call. They all had anxiety writ large on their faces and were busy exchanging pleasantries to while away the time of waiting. They were all attired in their best dresses and manners and Hariram was finding himself out of place in this group.

Hariram knew that he could not be one of them inspite of his best efforts. He was dark and considered himself ugly. He was convinced that his dress and demeanour, his language and pronunciation all showed of his lowly birth. He cringed further in his own lowliness, loathing his low caste, his indigent father, his illiterate wife and his jealous relatives.

Hariram need not have been so ashamed of himself, for what he had achieved in the circumstances was not insignificant. He was the best educated in his caste in the locality. He belonged to the chamar caste and his father earned his living making shoes. Hariram knew that whatever he had achieved had been by the sheer dint of his efforts and determination. But at this moment, he was being tormented by an overwhelming sense of utter dejection. He remembered the youngman he had met sometime back who had converted all his handicaps into assets and wished he could be like him.

He could never forget this youngman whom he had met while waiting to be called for another interview. The youth had entered the room with confident steps and had told the people gathered

there, "You are unnecessarily wasting your time; the job is mine." "Are you the minister's candidate?" someone had wisecracked. He said, "No, but I have such qualifications that I don't need any recommendations." Someone else said, "Then you must be a scheduled caste candidate." This made Hariram feel a pain in his chest and his heart started beating faster. But the youngman took a puff from his cigarette and coolly said, "That's right; but I have put down in my application that I must be considered on merits without any special consideration for my caste." He drew on his cigarette again and laughed. This time he looked at them all with amused contempt and said, "My father is a safaiwala. That is but a respectable term for a sweeper, and my mother too works as a sweepress. But all that is irrelevant."

Hariram knew that he could never be like this youth. There was no question of his feeling proud of his lowly birth and he always felt ashamed when mentioning his caste. He thought that his being born in a remote caste-ridden village had made him this way. He remembered his childhood. Though he was a good student, he had to sit away from the others in the class room. During the recess he stayed away from the other children and after the school helped his father in his work. His teacher was satisfied with his studies, but was never happy about the fact that a harijan student was doing so well.

The richest person in that area was a mine-owner, who was known to everyone as Seth. No one knew anything about his caste, but he was taken as belonging to a higher caste. Hariram remembered the rainy day in his childhood when he was running home after school and Seth's son had fallen down as he jostled past. The teacher had given him a beating for this and when he mentioned this to his father, he had scolded him. His father had thereafter taken him to Seth's house and had given him a thrashing there. He had cried a lot and had loathed his father. When he grew older, he knew better. He knew that his father had done this for his own good; had he not done this, he surely would have got a more merciless beating in the hands of Seth's servants.

Hariram passed the High School examination. He now knew something about the independence of the country and the abolition of untouchability, but he also knew that these had no meaning in his village. His father was still engaged in his caste

profession of making shoes and there had been no improvement in their economic condition. They still lived on the outskirts of the village, away from the high caste people. The day his matriculation results came out, his father took him to Seth. Seth was sitting on his verandah, his fat body bare. Hariram's father prostrated himself on the ground before him in salutation, and Hariram also did so, forgetting his clean clothes. Seth expressed his happiness at the news of Hariram's passing the examination and while fanning himself said, "How the bloody times have changed! Our boys are dropping out of the school and chamar boys are clearing examinations." Hariram's father folded his hands and said, "Sir, kindly do something for the boy."

Seth looked at Hariram up and down and when his father nudged him, he too folded his hands. Seth was in a happy mood and asked Hariram, "Do you want to continue studies?" Hariram nodded assent. Seth called his manager and said, "The chamar boy will go to the mining school; give his father whatever money is required every month." Hariram's father again prostrated himself in front of Seth and that is how Hariram got to continue his studies.

Hariram was the only untouchable in the hostel and he now preferred to forget those days of indignity and suffering He kept himself away from the other boys and concentrated on his studies. Though he was not a very good student, he managed to pass every year and finally completed his studies in the mining school. His father took him to Seth's house where they stood with folded hands again. Seth was not well, but he expressed his happiness on seeing Hariram. His father told Seth, "Sir, it is due to your kindness that the boy could study. Please give him a job. Let him not get any pay, but let him learn his work."

Seth said, "You should now forget that I had paid for his studies. Let him take a job wherever he wants and with whoever pays him more. I won't mind. But if he has to work for me, I can only take him on daily wage like all my other workers. He gets paid only for the days he has work. It is for you to decide." Hariram looked at his father who said, "Sir, he will work for you." Seth smiled and said, "As you like; I will pay well, seven rupees a day." Hariram and his father again folded their hands and Seth called his manager and said, "Put a chair outside on the verandah for the chamar boy."

This was how his service life had started. Since he was an untouchable, he could not sit with the others and had been given a chair and table outside on the verandah. Though he was better paid than many others, he was looked down upon because of his caste, and this created problems in his work too. Hariram realised that inspite of his education and his job, he had not been able to rise above his low social status, and inspite of his mining degree and work, he was for all purposes still a shoe-maker.

To get out of this situation, Hariram studied privately and obtained a diploma. In the meantime, he had been married to an illiterate girl of his caste and his children had been growing up in the same unhealthy atmosphere of poverty and meanness. He knew that he could escape only by taking a job elsewhere, and so started applying against various advertisements.

However, he soon found out that it was not easy to get another job. After attending many interviews he came to the sad conclusion that interviews were a mere eye-wash and candidates were in reality chosen much before the interview. He had to face many mocking questions during the interview, and comments were invariably made about the daily wage job of his, and he never got selected. After failure in the interview, he had to go back to Seth. Seth was a nice person and was satisfied with Hariram's work. Every time Hariram went back, Seth laughed and said, "So you are back again!" and called the manager, who put his chair back on the verandah.

Many years had gone by in the process and Hariram had returned to his seat on the verandah after several interviews. He was older now and this was the last interview he was attending. He had prayed to all known and unknown Gods before leaving his house and had also taken his father's blessings. He knew that this interview was for him the last hope of entry into a better future.

When he had exhausted his patience waiting, he was called inside. He always had a problem opening the door, for he could never figure out whether the door would open inward or outward. However, he got inside and faced the board of five interviewers. The questions started as soon as he had settled down. After ascertaining his age, education, expertise and experience, they asked him the inevitable question—"Why have you not got

a regular job and why are you still on daily wages?" He knew the question was coming but the answer was not so easy He said, "I was born in a remote village in a very poor family . . . ."

He looked at the gentleman who had asked the question. He was now busy writing something on a piece of paper. Two others were busy in a conversation and one of them was cleaning his pipe. The only member who was listening to him seemed to get impatient and said, "There is no need for such a long introduction; please explain briefly."

Hariram looked at the interviewer, but his bored face and fretful looks discouraged him. He shrank in his presence, and finally started saying, "Briefly speaking . . . ." Then he stopped. How can so many things be put briefly: the century old exploitation, poverty and atrocities, Rig Veda, Brahma's feet, Manu, Brahmavaivarta Purana, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Untouchability Act, entry into temples, cobblers' street, eternal Hinduism, pollution, purification, Jagadguru Shankaracharya, Bhangi colony bonded labour, Sadgati, conversions, reservations of seats, separate wells, unclean occupations, schedules, Belchi . . .? Hariram kept quiet and realized that he had failed. His pre-determined future was certain and inevitable which he could now foresee, clear and distinct, sitting in the interview room.

The door opened outside and Hariram saw himself come out with sure steps. Then there was the walk to the bus stop, the bus ride to the station, the afternoon train, the long evening walk to his village and a quiet night spent in his house. Next morning, he was back in Seth's office. Seth had died long since and his son who was now in charge of the business, sported safari suits and sat in a well furnished office. When Hariram stood before him with folded hands, he laughed and said, "So you are back!" He then called the manager and said, "Give the chamar a chair on the verandah."

Deliverance

The day Sudhir left for office without having his meal, his parents decided that Anasuya had no right to live. Over tea, they made plans for Anasuya's murder. They had, however, a difference of opinion; Anasuya's mother-in-law was in favour of poison whereas her father-in-law thought it safer to burn her with kerosene. They could also not agree as to whether they would make their daughter a privy to the secret.

The father-in-law, who was a retired petty government official, was now living a quiet life and was spending all his time thinking of various means of making money. Having spent all his life within the confines of government regulations, he knew of no other source of making money than through the marriage of his son. He was a straight and honest government officer while in service, but when it came to Sudhir's marriage, he resorted to the meanest tricks in fleecing Anasuya's father.

Anasuya was a working girl but her father was always worried about her marriage, since she was getting older. Besides, her father did not approve of the boy from her office who belonged to a different caste and was friendly with Anasuya. The intricate process of finding a bridegroom finally took her father to Sudhir's father and their first meeting was quiet pleasant. However, during every subsequent meeting, Sudhir's father presented a new demand and this became a continuous test of the financial capability of Anasuya's father. However, the day a scooter was mentioned, Anasuya's father knew that he had lost.

He remembered his eldest son who was doing business and

was living separately in another part of the town. After a great deal of hesitation he went to him and told him of the unfair demand from the boy's side. He had thought that his son would offer money on his own and see that his sister's marriage went off smoothly. However, after listening to his father, the son gave a spirited lecture against the dowry system and finally said that it was better for Anasuya to remain unmarried than to succumb to such unethical demands.

Tired and forlorn, Anasuya's father returned home, deciding that he must forget about Sudhir and look for a boy elsewhere. Unfortunately, as he was about to enter his house, he saw the boy from Anasuya's office coming out. He knew that he would not be able to scold the grown up and earning girl and so decided instead to go to Sudhir's house that very moment. He did not right away promise a scooter, but told Sudhir's father, "My son has such a big business; can't I give a mere scooter?"

Well, this clinched the issue and the marriage was fixed. The horoscopes matched and an auspicious date was found. Money was drawn from Anasuya's bank account to buy things for the marriage. On the day of wedding, all the items of her dowry were displayed prominently for the appraisal and scrutiny of the guests. On the plea that a scooter could not be bought at such short notice, Anasuya's father did not give the scooter. However, between the stainless steel utensils and the ornament boxes, he placed a chit of paper with the brand name of the scooter and its price. Like his son, he too was against the dowry system and had absolutely no intention of giving a scooter once the wedding was over. He was now congratulating himself for having got away with a mere piece of paper, which was now the source of much satisfaction for the boy's parents and of much merriment for the guests.

Anasuya's father had not thought that she would agree so easily to the marriage. He was also worried that her boy friend would create some problem during the wedding. But Anasuya was intelligent and understood what was in her interest. She knew that she was not welcome in her own house, since with her growing age she had become a veritable burden. She also knew that her boy friend, who wrote her long love letters and spoke of the immortal love of Romeo and Juliet, was in reality weak and gutless. Inspite of their long relationship, he had never

mentioned marriage; on the other hand, whenever Anasuya talked about her father's efforts to find a boy for her, he seemed quite relieved.

When the date of marriage was fixed, Anasuya took leave from her office. She tore up the love letters from her boy friend and refused to meet him. When Sudhir came to see her, she dressed up and served them tea and pulled the end of her sari across her face as she politely answered silly questions asked by Sudhir's parents. She had no curiosity about Sudhir's looks and personality and accepted the fact of her marriage as she did her growing age. She went coolly through the various rites and after the wedding went to Sudhir's house and tried to befriend his family.

The first few days after the wedding went off nicely. Sudhir's parents were kind and loving and his sister was friendly to her. Without the least reservation, Anasuya adapted herself to her husband's character, personality, financial condition and family circumstances. Like an obedient wife, she even accepted, without any feelings, Sudhir's demands on her body. She had taken long leave from the office and had enough time on her hands to look to the domestic chores. In no time, she had taken over the responsibilities of the low middle class household and was confident that she would run it smoothly.

At the end of her leave, Sudhir started going to the office and his sister's college also reopened. Anasuya now faced the hard facts of running a house together with her office work. The mother-in-law, who had so far been doing all the household work all by herself, gave herself a complete holiday and engaged herself full time in supervising Anasuya's work. She now found fault with whatever Anasuya did and did not hesitate to rebuke her. However, Anasuya's tolerance had no limits and she quietly bore all the admonitions of the illiterate, mean and quarrelsome woman that her mother-in-law was. She even did not bother to mention this to her husband, let alone make complaints.

She had hoped that once she resumed work her mother-in-law would give her a helping hand in the household work, but she had now become completely religious minded and chose to spend the entire morning in her prayers. She, however, kept a watchful eye on Anasuya, and felt like having a cup of tea just as Anasuya set out for office. Anasuya was worried about getting late, but

she managed to suppress her anger and went into the kitchen again to make tea for her mother-in-law. While giving her the cup of tea, Anasuya knew that the old woman was rejoicing at her discomfiture. She calmed herself with some effort and took a rickshaw to the office, having missed the bus.

Anasuya's father came to visit her once in a while after her marriage and since they were in the same town, she had thought that they would keep in close touch. But her father mostly spent his time gossiping with her father-in-law, and most of the time Anasuya did not even know when he came or left. Her brother had come to meet her only once, and that too for a couple of minutes. Sudhir's house was in a narrow lane where the car could not go, and her brother had to leave the car at a distance and walk down. This was too much for him and having once come there and exchanged pleasantries with her father-in law, her brother considered his duty done and never bothered to visit her again. Once when her father had come there, the mother-in-law was rebuking Anasuya, and he left quitely thinking it proper not to interfere in their domestic affair. From then on, his visits to Sudhir's house became less frequent.

Anasuya had no complaints about Sudhir. He too worked in a government office in a small position and was conscious about his responsibilities. He had a certain respect for Anasuya whose pay packet was a great help to the family. He was meek and mild and carried out his parents' every word. He avoided problems and whenever there was any quarrel in the house, he went out and returned home late. He knew of the strained relationship between his wife and his mother, knew that Anasuya was not to blame, but he chose to keep away from the problem.

Anasuya's father had conveniently forgotten about the scooter, but her father-in-law was on the look out for a suitable opportunity to broach the subject. One day, when Anasuya was anxiously looking for a rickshaw, having missed the bus making tea for her mother-in-law, the father-in-law said, "You must have a scooter now. Sudhir can then drop you at your office on his way." The fact, however, was that Sudhir's office was in a different direction and being a conscientious officer, he went to office very early in the morning. There was, therefore, no possibility of Sudhir dropping her at her office in the scooter. However, Anasuya said yes and stopped a rickshaw. The father-in-law did

not wish to leave the matter at that and said, "Your father has not come for a long time. Write him a letter and tell him that I am not keeping well and ask him to come." Anasuya again said yes and when she reached office, obediently posted a letter to her father.

When he got the letter, Anasuya's father understood that the invitation was not a mere pleasantry; it was a reminder for the scooter. He now completely stopped going to Sudhir's house, but the father-in-law was not one to be taken in so easily. Disregarding questions of propriety and his pretended illness, he went to Anasuya's father one morning. Anasuya's father reminded him about his health and admonished that he should not have taken the trouble of coming all the way. He then gave him tea and discussed the political situation in the country. They talked for a long time and the father-in-law did not find a suitable opportunity to mention the scooter. On his way back he regretted his foolishness and when the mother-in-law asked him if he had raised the question of the scooter, he lied that he had.

When Anasuya's father refused to turn up at their house in spite of repeated requests, her father-in-law had to make another visit. He was watchful this time and before Anasuya's father could start a discussion on the country's problems, broached the subject of the scooter. The father did not give a straight answer and skirted the issue by saying how it took eight years to get a scooter and how it cost seven thousand rupees more in the black market. He spoke about the financial crisis in the country and held the capitalist system responsible for the economic ills. The father-in-law had decided when he left his house that he would not this time succumb to such devious tactics. He put the matter bluntly now, let the economy go to hell, we must have our scooter. How long will you continue to cheat us?

Anasuya's father also wanted the matter to be settled once for all and said, "Who is cheating whom? What scooter?" The father-in-law took out from his pocket the chit of paper mentioning the scooter. Taking the paper in his hand the father said, "I had said that I was capable of giving a scooter. That does not mean that you will come and bully me in my own house." The father-in-law said, "We had taken you as a gentleman, otherwise we would not have gone through the marriage." The

father got worked up and said, "Who are you showing your gentlemanliness to now?" He tore the chit of paper into smaller bits and threw them at the father-in-law and said, "This here is your scooter." The father-in-law was basically a weakling and was afraid of talking back and left in a huff. The father took it to be the end of the scooter chapter.

The father-in-law debated in his mind whether to tell his wife a lie or give her the true account of his own humiliation, and finally decided in favour of the truth. When she heard about it, the mother-in-law called him a coward and a sissy and then they both sat down to chart out the next course of action. As per their plan, Anasuya was asked to visit her parents. Anasuya knew that this was part of some ruse and asked for Sudhir's advice. Sudhir was vaguely aware of his father's scheme, but asked Anasuya to go to her parents the same evening.

When Anasuya reached her father's place, her father understood the mischief and rebuked Anasuya for having come away without consulting him. Anasuya kept quiet and after paying the rickshaw-wallah went to the kitchen to get a few words of solace from her mother. But the moment she saw her, her mother burst out in anger and called her a fool and warned her that she was destined to a life of misery. Anasuya now understood that there was some indirect but deep link between the scooter and her coming home.

The next day was a Sunday and on Monday, Anasuya went to office. During the lunch break she tried to get Sudhir on the telephone, but the gentleman who took the phone refused to call Sudhir. When she rang up again, the line was engaged and then the lunch break was over and Anasuya could not speak to him. It was not possible to get Sudhir on the office telephone after office hours and Anasuya too was in a hurry to catch the bus. If she missed the bus, she had to wait another hour for the next one. When she got back home, she was again burdened with her worries. Office was for her an escape and she freed herself from the thoughts of her family, at least temporarily, by engaging herself in office work. However, when she came to the office next day, she found that a highly exaggerated story of her family squabble had already reached the office. Her colleague asked her the first thing when she met her, is it true that you had a quarrel with your in-laws and have run away to your parents'?

From then on, Anasuya found the office to be a rather unfriendly place. That day, the head assistant took her to task for some mistake she had made in a file and she could not pick up courage to use his telephone to ring up Sudhir. She imagined people in the office talking about her in whispers and looking at her with castigating looks. Her boy friend, who had been trying to get close to her again after her marriage in spite of her disapproval, was also not to be seen now. One day, Anasuya went up to his room in the office and called him outside. But her friend said, "I will come to you in a minute," but never met her.

The next Sunday, Anasuya's father took her with him to Sudhir's house. The father-in-law opened the door, but when he saw them, stood guard against the door. Her father said to Anasuya, "You go inside, we will have a chat," but the father-in-law now shut the door completely and came out on to the road and said, "Let's first talk about the insult you had given me, we'll then talk about her going inside." He said this rather loudly, thereby attracting a small crowd. Though these people were ignorant about the incident, they immediately became blind supporters of the father-in-law. One of them said, "After all, he is the son's father; we won't tolerate the girl's people coming to our locality and insulting us." Anasuya's father entreated, "Kindly listen to the whole story." But the man said, "What more is there to listen to? Please go away quietly."

By this time, some more people had gathered on the street and women too were enjoying the scene from open doors and windows. Anasuya's father knew that it was no use arguing further. So he said, "All right; we'll meet in the court next time." He started walking out of the street in brisk paces and Anasuya, suitcase in hand, followed him. The people of the locality were agitated because of the mention of the court, but Anasuya's father calmly hired a rickshaw near the pan shop at the end of the street, and they went home.

The news of this incident also reached her office in no time. While pulling her up for a mistake, the head assistant said, "Whatever happens in the house, you must do your office work properly." This was the first time he had mentioned her personal life, but Anasuya bore it calmly. Even the dirty old man in her office, who was always trying to be fresh with her, took

courage to come to her seat and said, "Even if you reject me, I am all yours; you have just to give me the slightest hint and I'll do whatever you say." Anasuya suffered this impertinence silently.

A few days later, Anasuya's father did indeed bring home a lawyer's notice for her signature. Anasuya was a little hesitant to sign the papers, but when she saw her father's determined face, she quietly put her signature on the papers even without reading them. The same day she wrote a long letter to Sudhir and requested him to come and take her home. Thereafter she tried to reach Sudhir on the telephone and when she got him after several days, Sudhir simply said he would come and put down the receiver.

The next Sunday, her father sent Anasuya by herself to Sudhir's house. When Anasuya got down from the rickshaw, some people from the locality surrounded her on the road side. There were even some women among them this time and one of them said, "The quarrel is no longer between the two families only. Your father has insulted us; he must come here if the matter is to be settled." Women tittered at this and someone remarked that the society had indeed gone to the dogs. They did not allow Anasuya to enter her house and Anasuya had to walk back to the end of the street to look for a rickshaw, suitcase in hand. The whole story was now known to the shop keepers at the end of the street and when Anasuya reached there, the man at the pan shop said loudly, "There will now be no end to these comings and goings." The rickshaw-wallah also looked at her with contempt and when she sat on the rickshaw, he spat on the ground.

Anasuya knew that she had become for them a woman without character, who had run away from her husband's house. She was subjected to her father's rebukes when she reached home and wrote another pathetic letter to Sudhir. In the office the next day, she could not put her mind to work and the girl who sat next to her took her out of the room to console her. For the first time, Anasuya broke into tears, but after some time wiped her eyes and went back to her table. She could not concentrate on the file and went to the first floor to meet her old boy friend. He came out of his room when he saw her in the corridor and said, "Why do you meet me here when so many people are

watching us?" Anasuya said, "I have urgent work with you. You must meet me after the office today."

Anasuya waited for him after office hours and he came and brusquely said, "What do you want now?" Anasuya said, "I am in great trouble. I will die if you do not help me. I have no one except you." The boy laughed derisively and said, "You did not remember me when you got married!" Anasuya was in no mood to join issues with him. So she said, "Please forget the past. I am in trouble and need your help. Please get Sudhir to come to me. You have to do this somehow." Her friend, who had expected her to renew her entreaties of love, appeared disappointed, and saying, "Well, let's see," left her.

A few days later, the lawyer sent for her to discuss the case. Sitting in the office room of the lawyer, Anasuya read the petition for the first time. Every line in the petition was a lie and many of the things were not only untruths, but were beyond Anasuya's wildest imagination. The lawyer said, "You will have to testify to all these in the court room under oath." Anasuya mechanically nodded her head and said, yes. The lawyer now got up from his chair and came round to stand behind Anasuya, and pointed at a portion of the petition where there was an oblique reference to the supposed impotence of Sudhir. Anasuya read the lines over again and looked at the lawyer. The lawyer now came closer to Anasuya and put his hand on her shoulder and hoarsely asked, "Can you say this in the court?" Anasuya suffered this vulgar advance silently and said yes and came away from the lawyer's office.

Fortunately, Anasuya did not have to go to the court, since her father had by now realised the futility of the litigation. The lawyer was asking for more money and her father had checked up from another lawyer that they had no case. He therefore forgot about his self-respect and thought about the scooter and went to his son. His son had no patience to listen to the long story and said, "I had been telling you from the very beginning not to get into this." The father said, "Forget about the dowry, but do go and talk to the father-in-law." The son said, "It is no use; better give him the scooter and be done with it." He went inside and came out with money which he gave to his father to buy a scooter.

The day the scooter was purchased, everyone thought that the

unpleasant matter had finally ended and Anasuya also felt a little happy. The scooter was sent to the father-in-law through a common friend and a few days later, the father took Anasuya with him to her in-laws' house. This time they were invited inside and the father was offered tea. Anasuya went straight to the kitchen and started cooking the evening meal as if nothing had happened. During the night, when Sudhir returned home and went to bed after his supper, he did not bother to ask Anasuya how she had been all these days and instead said, "I am not feeling well today, could you press my legs?"

Anasuya had thought that everything would get back to normal, but this was not to be. They were still cross with her and the mother-in-law did not talk to her properly. Sudhir's sister was Anasuya's only friend in the house, but she too was busy with her studies and her friends and had little time for Anasuya. One day Anasuya discovered a love letter in one of her books and could not decide whether she should ask her or tell the others. Finally, she told Sudhir, who rebuked his sister and Anasuya lost her only friend in the house. The sister now started finding fault with Anasuya and made complaints against her. To please her in-laws, Anasuya had severed relations with her parents and now became absolutely lonely.

She accepted the impersonal office and the unfriendly house as a part of her life. She accepted her mother-in-law's taunts, her father-in-law's harshness, her husband's indifference and her sister-in-law's hostility and resigned herself to a weary life. There was however a break in this monotony when Anasuya knew that she was going to be a mother. Though Sudhir did not get particularly excited with the news, Anasuya tried to keep herself cheerful in the midst of her bad health, visits to the hospital and difficulty of getting maternity leave. She even found her mother-in-law to be a little kind to her now.

Unfortunately for Anasuya, she gave birth to a girl, not a boy. The mother-in-law who was attending to her in the hospital turned her face and left the hospital without talking to her. Sudhir, who had no personal preference for the sex of the baby, however, respected his mother's wishes and expressed his displeasure at Anasuya for having given birth to a girl. Anasuya looked at the baby sleeping by her side and could not decide whether to be happy or sad, and when everyone

left, she wept for a long time. There was to be no end to her sorrows even when she came home. The child kept ailing throughout and after joining the office for two days after her leave, she had to take leave again. It was half pay leave this time and this became a cause for discontent. The child proved her worst enemy for she kept on crying throughout the night disturbing everybody's sleep and Anasuya was held responsible for this.

Anasuya's health suffered after the childbirth and she often fell sick, what with keeping awake at night and doing all the household work during the day. She joined office for some time, but found that both the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law were not happy since they had to look after the child in her absence. So she took more leave, this time without pay and this too caused much unhappiness. Sitting at home all day long caused a strange depression in her and she became sickly. She felt weak and lethargic and jumped when someone called her. She however felt a little normal and peaceful during the moments she spent with the child and when the baby smiled, she forgot all her sorrows and smothered her with kisses.

The baby died before she was six months old and Anasuya almost became mad with grief. When they asked her to go to her parents for a few days, she flatly refused. She would all the time sit quietly, as if in a trance, and would alternately cry and laugh remembering the child. They did not force her to go to the office in this condition. Anasuya did all the household work, but she now forgot things and could not think out everything rationally. They all let her alone and Sudhir too kept away from her.

One day Anasuya was in the kitchen cooking, but her mind was elsewhere and the curry got burnt. The mother-in-law came running in and pushed Anasuya aside. From this time, the mother-in-law did not hesitate to manhandle and beat Anasuya. Whenever she got a thrashing, Anasuya cowered with fear and bungled whatever she was doing and this became the ground for more rebukes and beatings. Anasuya now shied away from Sudhir and tried to keep away from him.

One day Sudhir got ready for office and sat down for his meal, but Anasuya said that it would take a little more time. Sudhir said he would get late for office and got up and left in a huff. The mother-in-law rebuked Anasuya and thereafter went to her

husband, and it is then that they both plotted Anasuya's death. They finally decided that they would sprinkle kerosene on her and burn her and make it appear like a suicide.

They chose the day on which Anasuya could not get up from bed in the morning due to her illness. The mother-in-law feigned affection and did not allow Anasuya to get up and did the cooking herself. After Sudhir left for his office and their daughter left for college, the mother-in-law asked Anasuya to get up and eat. Weak and tired, Anasuya sat up to eat, but could eat only a few morsels. This disheartened the mother-in-law for she had mixed sleeping pills in Anasuya's food. However, she made her take more sleeping pills, but Anasuya did not sleep; lying on the bed she kept thinking about herself.

She felt drowsy, but forced herself to keep awake and to remember all the familiar people. The faces of her father and mother, of her brother, of the head assistant, the shopkeeper, the lawyer, the rickshaw-wallah all appeared before her. The mother-in-law brought a tin of kerosene and put it by the bedside. Anasuya remembered Sudhir and also her boy friend. The mother-in-law removed all their valuable things from the room. Anasuya thought of her dead child and her face brightened up a little. The mother-in-law wrapped Anasuya with a sheet and went out to call the father-in-law.

Anasuya sat up on the bed. She now felt no weakness nor pain nor sorrow and there was a strange calm on her face. She stood up and with firm steps went to the door and locked it from inside. She went to the mirror and looked at herself as she arranged her hair. Her eyes reflected the peacefulness of a determined mind. She came and poured all the kerosene on the bed. She untied the end of her sari and took out the match box with a sure and steady hand. When she lighted the matchstick, there was not the slightest tremor in her resolute fingers.

The Picnic

Hardly had Jayadev entered the house on his return from tour that Sunanda said to him, "We had gone on a picnic yesterday." Jayadev was a little worried about an official matter and said, "Did you?" He then enquired if there were any telephone calls for him in his absence. Sunanda felt let down that such important news had no reaction from Jayadev and so she broached the subject again as she served breakfast. "We must go to the lake some time," she said, "there is a beautiful picnic spot." It was office time for Jayadev and he looked at his watch and replied, "Yes, we could go next Sunday. "

Sunanda had expected that the moment she mentioned the picnic, Jayadev would pester her with enquiries as to when they went, who all had come and so on. However, Jayadev was a strange person and was without any unnecessary curiousities. Sunanda remembered that years earlier, almost immediately after their marriage, she had asked Jayadev to open a suitcase of hers, the key to which she had lost. In this suitcase she had kept her personal things such as childhood photographs, forbidden books, handkerchieves given by friends, old letters on pink and blue paper and other trinkets and knick-knacks. Jayadev opened the lock with a nail but did not bother to open the suitcase. Sunanda had hoped that Jayadev would go through the contents of the suitcase and ask her about the junk and she would give a running commentary on every single item and lay bare her entire past before her husband. But Jayadev was least interested in the contents of her suitcase and when Sunanda took out the pink and

blue paper envelops, Jayadev got up and went out.

After Jayadev left for office that day, Sunanda took out her old suitcase again and rummaged through its contents. She wanted to find out if any of the items had anything to do with Arvind. She started reading the slim novel which she found inside. After a few pages she found that the book, which during her college days they had considered obscene, was in fact merely a cheap romance. She read the book till the end and then tore it up. She then went through the bunch of old letters. Many of these were from friends who she did not remember now. Quite a few letters were from "yours loving Manasi," and these contained restrained promises of eternal love. So far as she could remember, it was her room mate in the hostel who had written her these letters under the pseudonym of Manasi. Many letters were formal ones, but Sunanda had preserved them as the persons were close to her then. Sunanda had no contact with them and they meant nothing to her now; she, therefore, tore up the letters. The only friend of her college days with whom she was in touch with now was Samita who lived in their town. But in the bunch of old letters, there was no letter from Samita.

She tore up the letters and kept aside the half used letter pad of pink paper and gave her attention to other things. There were many photographs, but she did not recognise many of the faces and had no interest in others whom she recognised. She tore up these too. She found a small picture of Krishna in enamel inlay and took it to the puja room. After this she threw out of the window a girl guide badge she had collected as a school student. When the whole box was emptied and there was nothing concerning Arvind, Sunanda was both a little disappointed and a little relieved.

Sunanda now tried to look back at her college day relationship with Arvind from the safe distance of time. Arvind was two years—no, one year--no, no, two years—senior to her in college. He was handsome and wrote poems in the campus magazines. Sunanda had slight acquaintance with him, but in her mind she had woven many a romantic dream with Arvind as her beau. They met occasionally on the corridors of the college. Those days, girls used to move in a group and Sunanda used to blush with embarrassment as she left her friends to go and talk to Arvind. Their conversation was however limited to pleasan-

tries like "How are your studies?" or "What new poems have you written?" Even after a year's acquaintance, it had not gone beyond "I met your brother yesterday." But even these uneventful brief meetings used to be a source of great joy for Sunanda and the jealousy of her friends had perhaps something to do with this.

After the experiences of fifteen years of married life, the college days now seemed rather strange to Sunanda. She could not imagine how she had exaggerated their relationship into an emotional bond and was dreaming of a romantic life with him. She used to write long letters to Arvind which were full of tender passion, and though when they met she called him Mister, in the letters she addressed him in sweet intimacy as beloved, sweet heart and darling. Of course Sunanda tore up the letters no sooner they were finished, but the one-sided correspondence made her very happy as it brought Arvind nearer her in her mind. She thought of Arvind late into the night lying in bed and this too was a source of much happiness to her.

When Sunanda wrote the first real letter to Arvind, it was bereft of any romanticism. "Dear Mr. Arvind," she had written, "my brother had left by the time your letter came. I have, therefore, redirected it to his new address. You may write to his address I am giving below. With regards, yours sincerely, Sunanda." Her fingers trembled and her heart beat faster as she wrote these lines and she imagined that by some divine process Arvind would read her real message from the letter and cull out endearments such as dearest, with lots of love, ever yours from the commonplace words. Sunanda never received a reply to her letter, but she had for a long time kept with her Arvind's letter, which she had, in fact, not sent to her brother. She would repeatedly look at, read and touch the letter and imagine herself close to Arvind.

After all these years, she got news of Arvind from Samita. Arvind was a friend of Samita's husband and on his visit to their town, was staying with them. Arvind's arrival there when Jayadev was away on tour seemed to Sunanda to be a quirk of fate. She was keen to meet Arvind, but wanted to meet him in the presence of her husband. She felt she wanted Jayadev to meet him more than she herself wanted to meet Arvind. When Samita invited her to the picnic on Sunday, she said no. But when Samita said

she would bring Arvind to their house, Sunanda agreed to join them in the picnic instead.

When they turned up on Sunday to pick her up, Sunanda met Arvind after a lapse of several years. Arvind looked older than Jayadev and Sunanda also noted with relief that he looked no handsomer than her husband. Arvind was working in a bank and had perhaps married and settled down and he no longer looked like a poet. Sunanda compared him with Jayadev and found him wanting in every respect. This pleased her, but when Arvind asked her how she was, her heart beat a little faster. When they got into the car, Sunanda was careful in avoiding any contact with Arvind and when they sat down on the lawn near the lake, she kept herself as far away from him as possible.

Sunanda need not have been anxious at all, for Arvind did not seem to be least interested in her.. Arvind was busy discussing with Samita's husband their respective jobs and their pay scales and dearness allowances. Sunanda got bored in no time and wished Jayadev were there. She expected Samita to remind them of their college days, but she was busy arranging the plates. The entire picnic was thus rather dull for Sunanda and the few words she had with Arvind were far from exciting. She remembered that during college days, Samita used to tease her about Arvind and had expected that she would embarrass her by reminding her of those days, but Samita had apparently forgotten all about it.

Sunanda felt greatly disappointed with the picnic. She had apprehended that her meeting with Arvind would be a repetition of her imagined acquaintance with him and she would have a feeling of guilt before Jayadev. But their actual meeting was not only unromantic, it was rather prosaic and dull, and she wondered if she had indeed been so gullibly romantic in her youth. She remembered all the love letters she had written and in her mind begged for Jayadev's pardon.

When Jayadev returned from office that day, Sunanda again broached the subject of the picnic by saying, "Samita's husband was looking for you the day of the picnic." Jayadev ignored the reference to the picnic and enquired, "Did he tell you what it was about?" During bed time, Sunanda reminded Jayadev about their plans for the picnic next Sunday and Jayadev said, "Yes, I remember, on the twenty-fourth." But they did not go on the

picnic, as Sunanda herself took no interest in organising it.

From then on Sunanda tried to bring in the subject of the picnic in various ways, like. "It has not rained since our picnic;" or "The road to the lake is in a very bad state;" or, "Samita makes very good sandwiches." Jayadev refused to take any hint and made replies which were disappointing for Sunanda, for Jayadev said, "The monsoon this year is delayed by a fortnight;" or, "There will be no improvement till the new municipal elections;" or, "Have you tried the new restaurant?" Even when they visited Samita, no one mentioned the picnic or the chance meeting of Arvind and Sunanda. Sunanda finally had to come out with an invitation to Samita to go out on a picnic again, but unfortunately for her, Samita's husband chose this very moment to divert Jayadev's attention to an important official matter.

Having thus been frustrated in her circuitous attempts, Sunanda decided to tell it all to Jayadev in a straight forward way. When Jayadev left for office, Sunanda told him that she had something important to tell him. Had Jayadev asked her on his return from office, Sunanda would have told him the whole story. But Jayadev made no enquiries and Sunanda found it difficult to introduce the subject. This made Sunanda restless and the memory of the picnic continued to remain a heavy burden in her mind. When Jayadev left for office the next day, Sunanda made up her mind and took out the pink paper pad to write a letter to Jayadev. After rejecting several forms of address and tearing off several drafts, this is what Sunanda finally wrote: "I have been trying all these days to tell you about the picnic, but to no avail. Arvind, who was a friend from my college days, was also there. Though my friends said many things about Arvind and me, believe me, we had no such relationship. I know that it was wrong on my part to have gone to the picnic with Arvind. I hope you will not misunderstand me." She went through the letter once again and put it on Jayadev's table.

And before Jayadev returned from office, she took back the letter and tore it to shreds, as she had done at one time to the scores of letters she had written to Arvind during her college days.

The House

After some search Sadanand located a spot where he could stand in the shade and while talking to the building contractor could at the same time keep an eye on the labourers mixing sand and cement. This was his first experience in building a house and he had taken counsel from many friends and acquaintances. After lot of deliberation he had concluded that the most important thing in constructing a sturdy building was the admixture of sand and cement in the right proportion. That is why he visited the building site every morning and supervised the concrete mix. Unfortunately, the labourers had that day already mixed the sand and cement by the time he arrived and this seemed somewhat suspicious to him. He picked up a handful of the mix and felt it in his palm and said to the contractor, "Doesn't seem to be all right."

The contractor was quite aware of the ignorance of Sadanand so far as building construction was concerned, but he cleverly concealed the fact from him. He scooped up some mix and pretended to sample it and said, "You are very right, Sir. The moment my back was turned, they have bungled it again." He shouted at the labourers and asked them to put in more cement. The labourers too were familiar with this game and obediently put more cement in the mix. One of them gave a little bit of the new mix to Sadanand, who carefully sampled it with his fingers and gravely said, "It is all right now."

It was a holiday and Sadanand had left home after an early lunch to spend the whole day at the work site. There was no

arrangement to sit there and Sadanand always forgot to bring a chair from his house. The contractor had fixed a makeshift seat for him by putting a wooden plank on two stacks of bricks, but it was not possible to shift it along as the shade moved or the place of mixing concrete shifted. Sitting on the uncomfortable plank and adjusting his umbrella to the sun, he resolved to bring the chair positively the next day.

This made him think of Subhadra who was the mistress of the house in the true sense. Subhadra believed in having everything in the right place in the house and this was really the main reason why Sadanand had not been able to bring a chair from his house. For Subhadra, home was the collection of furniture, almirahs, trunks, boxes, utensils arranged properly within the four walls of the government quarter and she spent most of her time arranging these things and looking after them and washing her hands.

Subhadra was the inspiration behind plans to build a house of their own. Sadanand's was a transferable job and Subhadra grudged the removal of her things from one house and the botheration of rearranging them in another. Though she was adept at finding a secure place for every item of their belongings in a new house in no time, she wanted a house of their own where each piece of furniture, box and utensil would have its permanent address. She was, therefore, after Sadanand to buy a plot of land and build a house.

Sadanand was not ambitious and had decided to go back to his village after retirement to look after his small landed property. But this was a decision he had taken before his marriage and the birth of their son. In the meantime, there had been changes in the tenancy acts and there were doubts now about his right to the land in his village. He had therefore readily agreed with Subhadra and gone on looking for a piece of land.

His colleagues in the office often told him about the difficulty in finding a bridegroom for their daughters. Sadanand discovered that land was no less difficult to find. As matchmakers give information about the availability of a marriageable boy, so his friends and acquaintances gave him secret reports about saleable plots of land. Most of the time, however, by the time he contacted the landowner, the boy had been married elsewhere, that is, the land had already been sold to someone else, or else the

dowry was beyond Sadanand. However, Sadanand persevered and in a short time collected details of many government, private, endowment, wakf and encroached lands. He spent all his spare time after office hours in this venture and finally succeeded. He paid an advance to the old Muslim gentleman for his land one evening and heaved a sigh of relief after reporting the fact to Subhadra.

Arranging money for the land was the next hurdle which was equally difficult to cross. But he succeeded in chasing up his loan application at various stages and finally getting the officer's signature sanctioning the loan. He paid the balance money to the land owner and had the land transferred to his own name through registration. However, this was not to be the end of Sadanand's troubles and worries. The procedural formalities of constructing a house were as complex and elaborate as performing a yajna under strict vedic rites. After several visits and entreaties to his engineer friend, a plan of the house was made. This proved to be a timetaking process since the plan had to have Subhadra's approval. Subhadra and the engineer never met face to face and Sadanand had to shuttle to and fro with Subhadra's objections and comments and the engineer's corrections and clarifications. Subhadra had firm views on the size of the puja room, the height of the bathroom windows and the distance between the living room and the kitchen, and to translate these into the plan was a veritable test of the engineer's technical skill.

The day he collected ten copies of the blue print of the house plan from the engineer's office, Sadanand felt like an Olympics winner. Subhadra and he went over the blue print but it did not seem to meet Subhadra's strict scrutiny. The engineer had sketched the elevation beautifully with creepers at the entrance and an imported car on the drive, but Subhadra was unhappy because there were only the figures of a welldressed couple at the gate and she would have liked Somu to be there with them too. Sadanand wanted to discuss Somu with her, but Subhadra had by then switched on her thoughts to the arrangement of their belongings in the various rooms. When Subhadra started counting the water taps for the second time, Sadanand got up and left her alone.

Sadanand's happiness was shortlived for he had soon to parti-

cipate in another event which was an obstacle race. The obstacles were now the town planner, the municipality, the electricity supply and the public health departments. To cross them cost time, effort and money, but Sadanand was undaunted and in due course of time, the blue prints returned to him with the approval stamps of the various offices. He was now on that part of the stadium where the marathon of arranging house building materials started. Bricks, cement and iron rods vanished the moment Sadanand thought he had been able to reach them. But he got hold of these items too and one auspicious day the foundation digging was started after a small puja.

The unhappy memory of the tiresome efforts he had to make for constructing the house flashed through his mind on this Sunday afternoon as Sadanand sat uncomfortably on the makeshift bench of bricks and broken plank. He imagined his colleagues having their siesta and cursed himself for having got into this project. He remembered unpleasant incidents connected with his house building, which he would have liked to forget forever, like, the uneasiness of being seen by a colleague when he was sitting on the tailboard of the truck loaded with iron rods, the humiliation of being manhandled by the peon when he was entering the supply officer's room for his cement permit, etc. Besides these special events, he also had visions of unpleasant faces: of the landowner who had not given him a glass of water on the hot afternoon, of the clerk in the registration office who had taken a bribe of ten rupees from him, and of the accountant who revelled in raising impossible and endless objections on his loan application.

He felt disgusted and got up from his seat and went over to the contractor to tell him about the slow progress of the work. Obediently, the contractor on his turn shouted at the masons. Sadanand was about to comment on the concrete mix but restrained himself lest they put more cement than was necessary.

The plank was uncomfortable and so Sadanand got up and walked about pretending to supervise the work. He moved the umbrella from his left hand to his right and then back to his left hand and finally shut it and stood in the sun. He looked at his watch, but there was still plenty of time to go. He opened the umbrella and came back to his bench and tried to adopt a comfortable posture on it. The contractor was familiar with

Sadanand's every move and knew that Sadanand had had enough for the day. He chose this time to get him a cup of tea.

Sipping the welcome cup of tea, Sadanand made a mental note that the contractor was an honest man. He felt a little cheerful as he finished his tea and put down the cup. His mind came back to thoughts of his family. Though Subhadra ran the house competently, she did not share in his worries, sorrows and happiness. She spent all her time looking after the house and keeping everything, including herself, neat and clean. Besides, she was Sadanand's worst critic and nothing that he did met with her approval. Subhadra found every opportunity of haranguing him with her sermons. Though Subhadra would be fast asleep when Sadanand made his morning cup of tea, she woke up the moment he put sugar in the cup and reminded him of the doctor's advice. Throughout the day, she would find fault with the amount of water used for his bath, the suitability of the clothes he put on, and the need for taking the umbrella with him that day. He tried his best but always failed to take these taunts of his wife philosophically and this sometimes made him desp.se not only family life, but life itself.

Like everything that he did, this house was also not to the liking of Subhadra. She had reservations about buying the land from an infidel and had aesthetic objections to the shape of the plot. She was ignorant about the difficulties in getting a plot and had kept on asking Sadanand to get another piece of land. When Sadanand decided to construct the house on that plot, Subhadra took it to be Sadanand's incompetence or else his disregard of her opinion. At every stage of building the house, Sadanand had not only to fight his case with various unfriendly offices, he had also to face a daily battle in his own house. Sadanand always lost to his wife, who had an ultimate weapon in her armoury. She had the final word in all arguments when she said, I won't live in that house.

The other sorrow in Sadanand's life was Somu. Their son had gradually grown away from them and was almost a stranger to them now. Though they had given him all their love, Somu had never been really close to them. Even when he was in college, Somu had in his own heart built a home for himself in which there was no place for his parents. He got involved in political activities during his college days and since Sadanand did not like

it, Somu kept away from his father. He lived under the same roof, but he lived his own life. Later, he had left his political activities and had turned religious and spent his time with saints and godmen. Sadanand did not approve of this either, but Somu did not bother. He had now taken a job, but did not care to inform his parents as to what it was and how much he earned. He was almost a guest in the house, or rather a paying guest, since he paid some money to his mother every month. Sadanand had stopped probing into Somu's life and affairs since he had an apprehension that Somu might leave them if they bothered him too much.

Sadanand had wanted Somu to take some interest in the house building, but Somu had absolutely no desire to get involved. With great difficulty, Sadanand had once shown the plan of the house to him, but Somu had walked away without saying a word. In the plan of the house, Sadanand had earmarked a room for Somu and had sought to connect it to their bed room with doors, windows and corridors. But Sadanand knew that Somu would close all the doors and windows and shut himself off from them. Somu had declined to get married and had no plans of a settled family life. He preferred instead to spend his holidays in various ashrams. He had the spirit of a wanderer and it would have been of no surprise to Sadanand if he had packed off one day to lead a vagrant life.

Sitting on the uncomfortable plank of wood on this Sunday afternoon and thinking about his family, Sadanand's mind was filled with a suffocating sadness. The house he was building with so much trouble and labour seemed a mockery to him. He was to retire within a couple of years and would thereafter live another ten to twenty years. He was besieged with many questions. For whom is this house with a sturdy foundation and a long-life structure being built? For whose use are the doors, windows, corridors, cupboards, place for chairs and a surfeit of water taps? For the wife who disapproved of each brick and iron rod of the house, or for the wanderer of a son with one foot in the ashram? How does it matter if the walls collapsed in the matter of twenty years? To achieve what end is the supervision of the work necessary every morning, evening and on holiday afternoons? How much land does a man need?

It was dusk when Sadanand shut his umbrella and stood up.

He went over to the corner where the labourers were mixing cement and sand and scooped up a handful. He opened his fist a little and the sands of time streamed down. He heaved a sigh and as he set out to go home, he saw the contractor standing before him. He looked at the contractor for a long while and said, "I will come exactly at eight tomorrow morning. Please check that they mix the sand and cement in the right proportion."

Right to Live

There are two ways of facing death: death with one's will and death against one's will. Death against one's will is that of ignorant men and it happens many a time. Death with one's will is that of wise men and it happens at best but once. When normal life, as ordained by religion, is not possible, the wise man faces death voluntarily. After subjugation of all passions and abandonment of all worldly attachments, by gradually abstaining from food and water, he allows the soul to depart from the body and to be liberated from the bondage of Karma. This is the vow of Sallekhana in the Jain sutras.

The vows mention three types of deaths. Are you getting bored, nurse? Please look at me. When I started reading about these, I also used to get bored. But then I got so involved in the subject that I started enjoying reading about death.

Let me now talk of other things. Like your boy friend. See how your face brightened up the moment I mentioned your friend? Almost like the change from death to life.

I am fine today and I think my mental condition is better too. Perhaps you do not believe me. I have been talking in a disjointed manner all these days, and you perhaps think that something has gone wrong inside my head. But I am in sound mind and body and I am sure I am my old self again. You must listen to me today and I must tell you everything from the beginning. Will you please get me the card from my shirt pocket. What does it say?

Sanatan Pandit
1938—1980

Nineteen hundred and eighty has come and gone, but I am alive and the lama has been proved wrong. It is now fifteen years since I met the lama. He was in Varanasi on his way to Kausambi. He was sitting under a tree when I saw him while taking my morning walk. Though it was summer, he was dressed in heavy woollens and there was an Indian disciple sitting near him. I sat down before the lama who looked at me and smiled. I wanted to know about my future but the man sitting beside him told me that the lama was not a fortune-teller. I did not believe him, for the lama was still smiling at me. On my insistence, the lama said something, which I did not follow, but the other man did. He made some mental calculations and said to me: "December 17, 1980." The lama fell silent and became grave thereafter and looked the other way. I knew it was no use wasting time there. I came back to my hotel room with the date of a distant future.

I never believed in palmistry and astrology till I opened my shop. I was brave and rational before and was not afraid of ghosts, god, fate and rebirth. I was not even afraid of death. But when I had to take responsibilities in life, I started having a desire to know about the future.

Knowing about one's future is in reality knowing about one's date of death, for what is life but a preparation for this final act? Man is engaged, whether knowingly or unknowingly, in this preparation. Death is the final repayment of all debts. But you would say, who can know when death would come and where? There is a beautiful story about this. An old woman once nudged a trader in the crowded streets of Baghdad. He turned to find that it was Death and she had a look of surprise on her face. The old woman got lost in the crowd but to escape Death, the trader rode fast to Samarrah and knocked on the doors of an inn there. The door was opened by the old woman who said, "I was surprised to find you at Baghdad since our appointment was here at Samarrah."

I am telling you all this, nurse, to make the point that man is absolutely helpless in this one matter. He cannot determine the time of his death. I was however convinced that I knew the date of my death and I would die on Wednesday, December the

seventeenth. I started preparing for it, though 1980 was yet some years away. I knew that I had to leave this body which I had shared all these years and with which I had the most intimate relationship. But I also knew that when I part with this body, I would be free again from sorrow, love and treachery; from the torments of ageing and poverty and pain. It is already time for my medicine? Well, give it to me. One of the tablets is a sleeping pill, isn't it? Come to think of it, sleep is also a little death. If sleep is pleasurable, still more pleasurable is death.

How long do you think I have to stay on here nurse? Sometimes I feel like going back, but then I also feel like staying on here since I have nowhere to go back to. I had closed the doors of my life, and when I go back I will have to start all over again. You are already going? I am yet to tell you my full story. This time I must tell you everything systematically. But then, do I really know myself? Or for that matter, does everything have a reality of its own? Take my own name for instance. Pandit is not my name. Since I had a book shop and I always paraded my little knowledge, they had given me this name. People forgot my original name, and I also accepted it. Like we never bothered to find out what Dina Master's real name was.

Look, you are getting up to go, but I am still fumbling how to begin my story. No, I must start from the beginning this time. From my birth. But who knows about his birth really? For a man, his birth is as mysterious as his death. All that I remember is that as a child I lived with my uncle. I knew later that my parents had died after my birth and my uncle was looking after me. He had many children of his own. He had a low-paid government job and was a quiet person. My aunt was of a very severe nature and was always chiding us. Now I know that she was irritable because of her bad health. She used to rebuke us all the time and my childhood was unhappy because of her. I thought that she was always cross with me as I was not her own child. Had I but cared to analyse a little more at that time I would have known that she was no less harsh with her own children. Because of this unhappiness in the house, I could not do my studies properly. One morning, after an unpleasant scolding from my aunt, I left home.

I spent the whole day loitering on the streets and in the evening I was standing near the municipal market. A truck stopped

and since there were no porters around, the man said, "Hey lad, get the bundles down from the truck." I started unloading the goods and the shopkeeper, who was on the look out for a servant boy, engaged me then and there. I lived in the shop premises. A few days later, my uncle came to the shop looking for me, but I refused to go back.

In course of time, I had my own little stationery shop on the ground opposite the municipal market. My uncle came many a time and asked me to go back to him, but I refused. I started adding to my shop. It was around this time that I came to know Dina Master. He had a book shop near my shop. He used to dress in khadi and was a quiet, soft spoken old man who was friendly to all. Anyone having a problem would go to Dina Master and he went out of his way to help them.

One day some people from the Municipal Council office came and demanded money from the shop keepers who had set up unauthorised shops on the ground opposite the market. We all took our problem to Dina Master and he said, "We won't pay any bribes." The Municipality filed eviction cases against us, got orders passed and finally the police came to throw us out. On Dina Master's advice, we obstructed the police, but the police pulled down our shops and we were sent to jail. In all we spent twenty-eight days in the jail. It would have been a very unpleasant stay but for Dina Master. He had been to jail during the independence movement and was an example of how one could live with dignity even inside a jail. We used to get agitated over various matters, but he never lost his cool, though he had many family problems of his own.

It was only due to my contact with Dina Master that I discovered the world of books, which had been unknown to me till then. When the police arrested him, Dina Master had packed a few books in his bag, and in the jail he had given me his copy of Mahabharat to read. I had read the epic earlier, but inside the closed walls of the jail, the stories of the epic gave me new insights. I used to take my doubts to Dina Master and he explained everything to me lucidly. He kindled in me a desire to read and I started reading whatever I could lay my hands on. I was always a lonely man and books now became my best friends.

Is it time again for my medicines? How time flies! No sooner you have seen the morning, it is already noon and then the even-

ing. It was raining yesterday morning, but this morning it is bright and sunny, maybe there will be a rainbow in the sky. How is tomorrow morning going to be?

I promise you nurse, I will do whatever you say. I'll take my medicines in time and be a little better by tomorrow morning. And tomorrow, there will be a beautiful morning. Please sit down for a minute, nurse. I will make my story shorter. They say a coward dies many times. Does it mean that a brave man lives many lives? Was my own life a series of separate lives? My shop, my imprisonment, my marriage, were they compartments of a single life?

We all came out of the jail, signing bonds for good behaviour. All, except Dina Master, who refused to sign the bond. Our shops on the open ground were now recognized by the Municipality. I chose to open a book shop, since Dina Master's shop was not there. We used to go to the jail from time to time to look him up and also took care of his family. His wife was now working as a maid servant and his children had to leave school, but Dina Master was undaunted. He kept his calm in the jail, facing the various charges the police had brought against him.

In course of time we lost touch with Dina Master and his family. We visited the jail less frequently and gradually forgot him. We did not even know when his wife and family moved out of the city. It was much later that we learnt that the case against him had been withdrawn and Dina Master had gone back to his village. One day I thought of going to his village to meet him. But this was not to be since I had problems with my shop. And one day we got the news that Dina Master was dead.

I often think of Dina Master, the person who I owe most in my life. He had taken me out of my closed life into a world of enlightenment. The news of his death made me sad for a long time and I regretted that I had not been able to do anything for him.

Dina Master's death was for me the first view of death and I found it difficult to believe that he was dead. I would often imagine that Dina Master would one fine morning turn up in front of my shop and give me some new books from his bag. But as time passed, his memory also faded.

It was around this time that I got news of my aunt's death and went to their house. I was going there for the first time after I

had left the house several years earlier. This was the house where I had spent my childhood and youth, but I could find nothing of interest there. For me, it was a formal visit. But when I left the house, I thought of my past and realised that my aunt did indeed love me and was as affectionate to me as she was to her own children. This realisation gave me a strange peace and suddenly removed the rancour and bitterness I had about my childhood.

My book shop did well and I kept adding new books. I found students browsing through books in my shop and so I started a system of lending books for a small sum. This was something new in our town and my shop soon got well known as a lending library. It also became a meeting place for students. The boys started discussing new books with me and this encouraged me to read as many books as possible. Though I had no education, I read books on various subjects and gained some knowledge. It was during this time that they started calling me Pandit, and I too accepted the epithet.

Nurse, I must make you smile today. Look at me. See how cheerful I am, even though I came back after an encounter with death. When I saw you first, I knew that your name was Mary. And even though you have never mentioned your boy friend to me, I know his name, too. It is Joseph. You are perhaps sad since Joseph has not written to you. But look outside. What a bright day! You will surely get your letter today. Such a nice day cannot go waste.

I am much better today. Am I not? How long will it take for me to leave? You have been very kind to me and I feel indebted to you. But I must also tell you the whole story before I leave. Won't you send me the invitation card for your wedding? I know you like roses. I will bring you the biggest rose that day.

Did I tell you about my own wedding? What can one say about a brief togetherness of just one year? One morning, my uncle suddenly appeared in my shop. He was now looking much older, and had come to me with a proposal for my marriage. I had not thought about it, though I was no longer so young. I agreed to my uncle's proposal and got married. I did not know at that time that the girl was much younger to me in age, and that she was the same shy girl who used to borrow books of poetry from my shop.

I never imagined that married life could bring such fulfilment. I was now content. My business did well. I engaged an assistant. I took a bigger house on rent. My life became centred round Sucharita. I stopped looking for anything more out of life.

My happiness was destined to last just one year. I had no close personal knowledge of death. I did not know when and how Dina Master had died. I had no feelings when my aunt died. But Sucharita faded away in my very presence. She died with her head on my lap. Complications had started at the child-birth and the child was the cause of her death. Sitting on Sucharita's bed and seeing her slowly leaving me, I had only one thought in my mind, let the child die. And finally this came to be. I placed Sucharita's eighteen year old body, my happiness peace and future, and all the beautiful mornings of the world on the funeral pyre and returned and in a few days the child died too. I thought I was now free from all worldly involvements.

But then it is not easy to sever all your connections. I wanted to go back to Sucharita. I started reading about the right to die. I wrote to organisations like Hemlock in California and Exit in London. And I decided that I had a right to take my own life and I would die as per my own will.

It was at this time that I remembered the Lama. Seventeenth December, I started celebrating my death day, not my birthday, and calculated how many months and days it was to my death. People who heard of this made fun, but after my wife's death I had little social life and I did not mind what people said.

Though the date of my death was years away, I started arranging my affairs and tried to sever all my attachments. But howsoever one wants, one cannot live outside of society; living itself creates its own involvements. I had to run the shop and had to have contact with people. But I had become quieter now and had only a few friends.

I spent all my spare time learning more about death. I read about Sallekhana and all the litearture published by Exit. I had by now a fair idea about the way I was going to embrace death. I wanted to execute my will and wanted to leave all my money for Dina Master's family. But inspite of my best efforts, I could not locate them. Then I concluded that it was no use worrying about what would happen to my meagre assets after my death. I stopped thinking about it.

Why are you crying, nurse? Because the patient in the next room died? Man has tremendous capacity to withstand sorrow. Her husband and children will accept her death in no time and settle back to their own lives. Life is full of immense possibilities and will soon take over. You don't believe? Look at me. I have flirted with death and come back. When I decided to embrace death, my desires died. Then my happiness died. My fears and my sorrows died too. But when I came back after looking Death in the face, do you know what happened? I had no fears, no desires, no sorrows. I had only an undaunted will to live.

If I had not tried to take my life, I would not have met you. And meeting someone is living. I think of tomorrows. What will tomorrow bring me? New faces, new places, new events, and these have no end, no substitutes. I know that if I have a right to die, I have a right to live too.

And so I rejected death. Before the sleeping pills could lull me to an eternal sleep, I revoked my decision. My hand reached the telephone. From my hotel room, I moved to the hospital bed.

These were no hands now, my hands had become wings. I was flying high in the room. The dark soon dispelled and I could clearly see the man lying on the bed. It was me. I saw Sucharita. She was flying by my side. I was walking on a lonely street and opening a gate to enter the jail. There was a funeral pyre burning and my aunt was smiling at me from the fire, a benign look on her face. I looked for Dina Master in the crowd but he was not there. Instead, I saw the man who Dina Master was trying to save from the gallows. The child was stretching her arms towards me. A group of policemen were standing beside the bulldozed shops, but I could also see a whole row of new shop buildings in the rear. I saw youngsters with butterfly wings flying about the book cases. I saw myself giving Sucharita the latest book of poems.

Sucharita was in her school uniform. Sucharita was smiling. Sucharita had vermilion in the parting of her hair. Sucharita was placing her hand on mine in the cinema hall. Sucharita was pregnant. Sucharita was lolling on the rainbow. Sucharita was standing at the hospital gate in a nurse's frock.

There are two ways of living life: life with one's will, and life against one's will, which is the ignorant man's life. Wise men

live a life with their will. You seem to be getting bored, nurse. Look at me. What is it? You are not Mary. You are the new nurse, but I know your name, too.

Third World

Mamaji's flight was scheduled to arrive at five in the morning, but it actually landed at noon. Delhi airport is quite a distance from the University and so I had come to the airport the previous evening to receive Mamaji. It was torture on a December night and the announcement of the delay of the flight was rather distressing to me. Besides, Mamaji was not related to me. My friend from Bombay had written to me that his Mamaji was coming to Delhi to attend some international seminar and I should look after him. Mamaji was a professor of economics in the United States and since I was also teaching economics in a college, my friend had thought it fit to write to me. Though I was getting restless this winter morning, having waited for ten hours, I must admit that I had been rather delighted when I got my friend's letter. I had a vague hope of making it to the States for higher studies some time, through the courtesy of this unknown uncle.

The chubby bouncing bearded gentleman in horn-rimmed glasses coming out of the customs enclosure, who I thought would be Mamaji, was in fact Mamaji. Two organisers of the seminar had also gone to the airport to receive him, but when I introduced myself, Mamaji shook my hand warmly and embraced me, and ignored the two gentlemen. They had brought a car for him and had made his reservation in a five star hotel. As we sat in the car, Mamaji removed his hat; he was completely bald, but his baldness appeared to me to be a perfect complement to his jovial self.

Once we were in his hotel room, Mamaji got rid of the two gentlemen and asked me to sit down. Mamaji now spoke to me in a more intimate manner and I noticed that his demeanour changed. He was till now speaking with an accent and his dress and his bearing was hundred per cent American. But talking to me alone, he seemed less an American and I felt quite close to him. Mamaji started opening his suitcases to take out his things and to help him, I picked up his small suitcase and took it to him. He hung his coat, put the suitcase on the table and rung up room service and ordered soda and ice. He then opened the suitcase, which contained bottles of drinks, and arranged the bottles on the table. He winked at me and said, "I have come prepared for a week."

After he had unpacked, Mamaji went over to the window and looked outside. In the soft winter sun the trees outside looked a lively green. Mamaji came back from the window and heaved a sigh and picked up a rose from the vase on the table and looked at it for a long time. "Do you see?" he asked me, but when I tried to take the flower from his fingers, he did not let go. We looked at the rose in his hand some more. Mamaji became sad and thoughtful all of a sudden and when I looked at his eyes, he only sighed again and said, "No, it's nothing." He poured drinks, added soda and ice and passed on a glass to me. He took his own glass, sat down comfortably on the sofa and took a long swig and talked to me about himself.

Mamaji had gone to the US eleven years ago. Born in a poor family in a village, he had done his M.A., gone on a fellowship to America, done his Ph. D and had started teaching there. He had married there and had become an American citizen. He now had no connection with his village, except exchanging letters once in a while. Even when he came to India for some seminar or conference, he stayed only in Delhi and did not find time to go to his village. He was a very friendly person and so far as I could see, enjoyed his drink. Though I was still on my first drink, Mamaji had had three drinks already and was prodding me to finish my drink quickly.

The seminar Mamaji had come to attend was on the subject of poverty in the third world. Mamaji was to read a paper on the definition of poverty and he gave me the draft of his paper to read. His paper started like this:

"Countries are neither rich nor poor. It is individuals that are well-fed or hungry, healthy or sick, literate or illiterate, happy or miserable. This is so obvious as to be hardly worth saying, were it not for the fact that we often write, speak and act as if we had forgotten it."

I looked up from the paper at Mamaji's face. Though he was looking at me, his eyes seemed to be searching for some far-off land beyond me, beyond the thick curtains and the stone walls. I felt as if Mamaji had cut himself off from the limits of time and space and was now looking at a poverty-ridden childhood experience in his village home.

"Empty your glass, quick," Mamaji commanded, "you must have lunch with me here today." He rang up room service and ordered lunch and refilled his glass. I started discussing his paper with him. Mamaji said, "In approaching the problems of poverty, the economic planners see it as a problem of a poor country rather than that of some people; hence the concern for aggregate measures such as the GNT, per capita income, rate of growth, etc. My approach is to find out a definition of poverty which will fit those people. I call it the psychodynamics of poverty, for I think poverty has a culture of its own beyond daily calory intake, income and health. For instance, you will notice that the poor people do not participate or integrate in the major institutions of the larger society, there is absence of childhood as a prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle, there is a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness and of dependence and inferiority and there is little ability to plan for the future and a sense of resignation and fatalism. Well, that is the culture of poverty."

Our lunch arrived and we forgot the definition of poverty and attacked instead the calory-rich dishes. Mamaji was now unusually grave and quiet. He was about to pour another drink, but looked at the flower and pushed aside the bottle. When I took leave of him after lunch, he suggested that I came to the hotel the next day so that we could go to the seminar together.

From the next day, the seminar started with its usual paraphernalia; the Minister's inauguration, the coffee break, and the papers. It was an international show and scholars from different countries had been invited. I found many of the lectures very

useful for me, though I found it a little tedious to attend the lunches, dinners and the cultural programmes which are so much a part of such seminars. Mamaji read his paper one day in the morning session and it went off well and I was quite proud of him, for it was indeed a brilliant paper. Mamaji came to me after his paper and got me involved with the activities of the seminar, including a trip to Agra.

Towards the close of the seminar, spirits seemed to have dipped. When the delegates decided to go visit a poor village, Mamaji declined to go and when I asked him, said, "For me, there is nothing like a poor village, poor state or a poor country. It is only the people who are poor and you can see them anywhere." When the delegates left for the village, we came to Mamaji's hotel room. No sooner had we got inside than Mamaji asked for soda and ice and when he poured the second and the third drinks in my glass, I did not object this time. Mamaji was to spend another two days in Delhi and we chalked out detailed programmes. On the thirty-first, he had no work and suggested that he would spend the day with me.

I now had the responsibility of looking after and entertaining Mamaji for a day and rang up a friend, who also knew Mamaji's nephew in Bombay. This friend of mine was in the ready-made garment business and within a few years had made a good deal of money in exports. When I mentioned the seminar and Mamaji to him, he did not seem particularly receptive and asked me if the Commerce Minister had inaugurated the seminar. Lest he put down the receiver, I added hurriedly that Mamaji was going to bag the Nobel prize in a year or two. He seemed a little more interested now and asked, "Where did you say Mamaji lives in the States? Does he know any senators there?" I now added more lies and told him, "Mamaji is quite well known there for his new economic theories. He is friendly with many senators. But why do you ask?" He said, "No, it's nothing. USA is often reducing its import quota of garments. One may have to do some lobbying sometime." And then, before I could make the request to him, he said, "Do you need the car? I will send it to you. And bring Mamaji over to our New Year's Eve party. Any time between eleven and twelve-thirty." He named a famous hotel and put down the receiver.

When I reached Mamaji's hotel on the thirty-first evening, he

was already waiting for me in the lobby, suitcase in hand. We came to my house and the first thing Mamaji did in my house was to take out his bottles and arrange them on my table. He then removed his shoes and sat down cross-legged on the divan. Mamaji had the great ability of switching over from his American to his Indian self with absolute ease. He asked me to fetch two glasses and said, "Don't you have any eating places nearby where we could have some *pakoras*?" I said, "Yes, Mamaji, but we have to go some distance." Mamaji poured the drinks and said, "Does not matter, we'll drive down." We carried our glasses into the car and drove to Munna Mia's road-side shop. Mamaji savoured the *pakoras* with great relish and got down from the car to argue with Munna about the salt and chillies in them.

When we came back home, Mamaji said, "It was a nice evening." I reminded him that we had still to go to the party. Mamaji said, "The *pakoras* were real good. A little too much salt perhaps, but very tasty." I guessed Mamaji was trying to recreate some old Indian evening in his mind. I asked him, "Don't you feel like going to your village?"

Mamaji did not answer. He took a sip from his glass. I was awaiting his reply, but he just finished his drink and got up to fill his glass again. He then put on his shoes, stood up and looked at me. He was the complete American now. He said, "It must be terribly cold back in the States now." I knew that for Mamaji, the Indian evening was over. We got into the car to drive to the hotel to celebrate the New Year's Eve.

We left behind the dark lanes and the congested colonies to get into the main road, and it was eleven-thirty by the time we reached the hotel. It was all shine and glitter with flowers and buntings and coloured lights and the hotel was like a pleasure island. There was in this secluded spot no need, no want, no disease, no hunger, no helplessness, no frustration. Mamaji said, "In every developing country, there is a pocket which is a replica of the most advanced capitalist country of the world." My mind was now heavy with the drinks I had taken and Mamaji's words did not register. I introduced Mamaji to my friend and then surrendered myself to the effusive pleasures of this wonderful world. I was enveloped in the luxurious sensation of subdued lights, balloons, flowers, perfumes, western music and

dancing couples. I leaned on the table and forgot everything as a sensuous dream took over.

When I opened my eyes it was dark all around but there were bright lights suddenly and the place reverberated with cries of "Happy New Year." My friend and Mamaji helped me stand up and said, "It is you who enjoyed the evening most." They led me through weird corridors with magic carpets, celestial lights and mysterious mirrors and we came out on to the open. Outside the airconditioned confines of the hotel, I came to in the cold open and when the three of us got into the car, I was sober enough to wish them a happy new year. My friend said, "He will be all right with an ice-cream in Connaught Place."

When the car moved, the cold breeze hit my face and by the time we entered the inner circle of Connaught place, I was wide awake. I looked at my watch; it was half-past-twelve. Though it was very cold, a large number of cars and motorcycles were cruising about blaring their horns and the place was quite crowded. We parked outside the ice-cream shop and got down. The crowd was so thick that it was difficult to enter the shop. Everybody was in a festive mood and people were carrying balloons in their hands and had caps made of coloured paper on their heads. There was a young girl sitting on the footpath near our car. She should have been dressed in heavy woollens and playing with balloons. But as a matter of fact, she was dressed in rags and was selling balloons. I bought balloons from her and considered my social obligation discharged as I gave her the money. We then bought the colourful caps and donning them, joined the revelry.

I now noticed a group of people who were also crowding the streets along with the revellers. They were beggars and were after left over ice-cream and small change. Some of the beggar women were carrying little children in their arms and braving the severe cold, were giving ice-cream to the children. We got into the ice-cream parlour with great difficulty through the throng of revellers and beggars. My friend looked at the crowd inside and said, "You better wait outside; I'll bring the ice-cream."

We came out to be surrounded by shouting beggars who had expected us to have ice-cream cups in our hands. When they saw our hands empty, they left us alone and ran to another

group. One beggar woman with a child of two or three years in her arms, however, clung to us and begged for some money to buy food for the child, who she said had not eaten for two days. I felt moved and said, "Mamaji, what will happen to this land?" Mamaji had not forgotten about his talk and said, "The real question is, what will happen to this child?" Mamaji reverted to his pet subject of the definition of poverty and we forgot about the beggar woman and her child.

Our friend came out from the shop at last carrying ice-cream cups and bawled at the beggar woman who was still whining. He was going to give her some money when Mamaji stopped him. Mamaji had definite views about misuse of money by poor people. "Better give the child something to eat," Mamaji said. At this time a bunch of balloons flew at us from somewhere and this started off a noisy round of fun and frolic. In this atmosphere of gaiety and revelry, the beggar woman and her crying child seemed to me completely out of place, and with an air of sacrifice and benevolence, I gave my ice-cream to the woman.

The woman cringed with gratitude as she took the ice-cream from my hand and I looked at Mamaji lest he reprove me for my action. But Mamaji was looking at the child, as did my friend, and we were waiting to see how the child would hungrily fall upon the ice-cream.

Neon lights, balloons, festoons, buntings, coloured caps, blaring horns and loud music had made the place look like a surreal film in which the woman and her child were appearing to us as if in a close-up. We were seeing their every movement in slow motion, as the mother affectionately turned the face of the child towards her and gave him the ice cream.

The child stopped crying. He took the ice-cream in his little hand. He looked at it. He threw the ice-cream on the ground and said, "I want a cap."

J. P. DAS is a well known author, poet and playwright. His works have been translated into several Indian languages and his plays have been staged in different parts of the country, besides being adapted for radio and television.

His publications in English include—*First Person, Love is a Season*, and *Timescapes*, all collections of poems, and a play—*Before Sunset*.

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